

Christmas Eve – Luke 2:1-20

How should we properly celebrate this Blessed Evening - and the joyous days that follow? Perhaps the only appropriate way to celebrate Christmas may be - "as a little child" - with the faith and joy that we see in children's pageants and the telling of the Christmas story.

God in his majesty and might could have chosen to dazzle us with his omnipotent power in some spectacular fashion. Instead, God chose to reveal himself as a lowly babe in a manger. Only when a child came was there Christmas; and only as we become like a child can we have and keep Christmas.

How do we do that? First of all, we need to be ready to listen when God speaks, even when God's message to us doesn't come in the way we expect it. Sometimes, "a little child shall lead them." A child told a military captain that he could be healed of his leprosy. A child was called to our Lord's knee to show the stature one had to have to enter the door of his kingdom. A child brought the bread and fish which our Lord used to feed the multitude. And in these latter days, God revealed himself to us through a Son - a child, Christ the Lord - who fulfilled the promise made in the Old Testament, "To us a Child is born, to us a Son is given."

When we see this Babe "wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger", we are tempted to forget that he is the Almighty God. But, when we hear a heavenly host of angels proclaiming him to be so, then

the Spirit moves us to confess, "Surely it can be no other than the Son of God!"

But, many of us are just not ready to receive God "as a little child". And many people on that first Christmas night were not ready. Camped around Jerusalem were the Roman legions, none of whom could be accused of being child-like. It was Christmas Day there too, but it was only for the shepherds on the Judean hills that the angels sang. It was Christmas Day in Herod's palace, but the Saviour was born in a lowly stable and to a humble maiden named Mary. In Athens - the wise men of Greece were to be found - but they did not see the star. It appeared to others: Wise men who longed to see the Light of the world.

So, are we people of the twenty-first century ready for Christmas? Ready to get down on our knees before the manger, ready to stoop down to the level of a child so we can have the proper perspective - one from which, alone, we can see this miracle in a manger?

Some children's playgrounds limit small children's entry to a "tiny tot play lot" through a low gateway shaped like a keyhole. Admittance to this playground depends on the ability of the child to walk upright through the low gate. Theme parks reserve special rides for small children by limiting the height of the rider. Only those below a certain line on the measuring post are granted permission to go on the ride. In other words - their size is their ticket.

Our size, too - the size of our egos - determines whether or not we can have Christmas and the kingdom of heaven this lowly Baby brings us. "Remember this!" Jesus said, "Whoever does not receive the Kingdom of God like a child will never enter it." This is the only way.

We need the simplicity and trust of a child-like faith to say "I am a sinner". Daily, we fall short of what God expects of us. We don't deserve God's mercy and forgiveness. But, fortunately for us, we have a Saviour. We can't understand all the mystery and wonder of Christmas - how God's salvation can come this way. But, we can believe it. This baby, Jesus, is our Saviour from sin and the Saviour of the whole world.

"We all need a Saviour - we all need forgiveness for devising a god of our own liking and wanting our life on our own terms. We need forgiveness for doubting and for not trusting that God knows what is best for us. We need to ask for that forgiveness - we need to trust in child-like faith - faith in the Christ-child as our Saviour."

What burdens our heart this day? What fear or sorrow keeps us from the great joy about which the angels sang? Maybe we can learn from a little child ...

Our teacher is a 6-year-old little girl named Becky. Becky's home life gave little to be joyful about. Her father, an alcoholic, spent little time at home; and when he was there, he and her mother spent much of their time yelling at each other. Becky would run to hide in her bedroom for hours.

Becky liked Sunday school, though - especially practice for the children's Christmas program. She was a sheep; no speaking part - not for quiet introverted Becky.

One Sunday, when practice in the auditorium was over and the children had returned to their Sunday school rooms, Becky's teacher found her still in the auditorium, sitting on the floor next to the manger. She had taken the Jesus doll out of the manger and was holding it tightly in her arms. She was singing "Jesus Loves Me". Becky found a moment of great joy amid the pain in her life. The answer to our failures and imperfections, too, is found the perfection of Jesus Christ, the source of our celebration.

Do we still have a child-like faith such as this? Can we this blessed Christmas Eve still come as a child to see the child in the manger? To rephrase Jesus' words, "Whoever receives the kingdom of God like a child *will* enter it."

By the Holy Spirit's power, those who have the faith of a child in the child of Bethlehem want to witness to the Child. "When the shepherds had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child." Do we, no matter how many Christmases we have celebrated, still follow the child-like example of the shepherds in our text and tell those with whom we work and live about this child?

A little girl was about to undergo a dangerous operation. Just before the

doctor administered the anesthetic, he said to her, "Before we can make you well, we must put you to sleep." The girl responded, "Oh, if you are going to put me to sleep, then I must say my prayers first." She folded her hands, closed her eyes, and said, "Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep. If I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take. And this I ask for Jesus' sake. Amen." Later on, the surgeon admitted that he prayed that night for the first time in thirty years.

Only as we witness to this child with the unabashed simplicity of faith of the "little ones" of the kingdom of God - can we celebrate Christmas. This very day, in David's town, our Saviour is born - Christ the Lord!

So come again - as you have ever since you were a child, ever since you were baptized - and enfold this Babe in the manger of your faith, give yourself as the shepherds did to him because he gave himself on the cross for your sins and paid for your eternity in the bosom of the Father. By the power of the Holy Spirit make a Christmas gift of yourself as you tell others how Christmas is fulfilled in your eternal salvation through this wondrous Child.

Luther comments on the shepherds in one of his Christmas sermons, "This is wrong. We should correct this passage to read, 'They went and shaved their heads, fasted, recited their rosaries, and put on cowls.' Instead, we read, 'The shepherds returned'." Where to? To their sheep. The sheep would have been in a sorry way if they had not.

We, who have gathered here this evening - need to go back to our homes, to our neighbours, to our jobs. The sheep are waiting for us. We need to tell them of the Christ-child who was born a Saviour *for them*.

And, as you leave today through our church doors, smaller in stature but greater in faith than when you came in, I say to you, "A very blessed Christmas - in the name of the Christ Child."

Amen.

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE FOR CHRISTMAS EVE 2024

On this night of quietness and joy God calls us to be at peace: with God, with other nations, other races, others of all kinds, with each other. Tonight, we beseech God to pour out love and understanding on our broken and troubled world, remembering those for whom peace is unknown and sorrow is the stuff of everyday life.

Gracious God, the message of salvation is proclaimed tonight in the birth of your Son. Give us ears to hear the Good News and feet ready to run like the shepherds to tell others about your love found in a manger and hung on a cross.

Advent has been a time of waiting, of preparation. As Mary was prepared for the birth of Jesus, you have once more prepared us to celebrate his birth. Help us to be faithful as we prepare for your coming again.

Infant Jesus, as we gaze upon your small body with love, we stand at the Cross and look upon your body broken and your blood shed for us in love. Use our bodies as you did Mary's to house your Holy Spirit. Use our lips as you did hers in obedience to your will for our lives. Use our hands as you did hers to care for those around us. Use our feet as you did hers to follow where you lead.

Lord Jesus, we remember those in our midst who are sick, grieving, lonely, especially those we name before you now or in the silence of our hearts. Be with them and bring them healing, comfort, and your tender and gentle presence.

God of life, God of new life, by the birth of Jesus you have brought light into our darkness. Nothing will ever separate us from your love. You call us to serve the hungry, the poor, the lonely and the outcast. Show us how we can respond.

Lord Jesus, you were born into poverty and lived under oppression. Open our eyes to injustice and inspire us to proclaim your kin-dom come near. Inspire this congregation to reach out beyond our walls, beyond our fears, beyond our past. Help us to welcome your future.

On this night of quietness and joy, we pray for those without shelter, food, family, or friends; for those who work long hours with little reward; for children who are abused or neglected and for the sick. We pray for all who suffer from discrimination and hopelessness. May the birth of the Christ child fill them with hope and love.

We stand in this silent and holy night free to begin again, forgiven and forgiving people, unafraid to proclaim you as Lord. May our hearts beat as one with you, Child of Bethlehem, as we go forth declaring your glory and your promise of peace in our hearts. Glory to you, and peace to all people on earth.

Amen.

We pray in the name of Jesus, our light, our life, and our hope, who taught us to pray:

Our Father ...