

**Christmas Eve
December 24, 2017**

**In the name of the God of all Creation
... the One who brought us into being
The God alive in each of us
... as God was alive in Jesus
And the power of God known in the Spirit
... the Spirit who blessed Mary with God's Son.
Amen.**

The Feast of the Incarnation. The Nativity of Our Lord. The birth of Jesus ... the Christ child. Christmas. It is the gift of God's Son to the world, the divine presence of God coming alive in human form. It is God's blessing upon us so that we, too, might be a blessing in return to God's world. What a glorious night, made all the more glorious by this beautiful setting.

This week I saw a Facebook post about a Christmas pageant that a parent had video recorded. Mary was kneeling next to the manger ... and Joseph was standing beside her ... when one of the angels ... cute as a button and about three years old ... walked up to the manger and grabbed the doll baby Jesus and started to walk off with it. Of course, Mary would have nothing of it, and the two struggled over the baby Jesus ... each had an arm of the doll in a tug-of-war. It was the kind of moment that makes every parent cringe.

In my 40 plus years of ordained ministry I've seen my share of Christmas pageants. Yes, they teach the children the story of the birth of Jesus, but it seems to me that I had to hold my breath too many times. There was the year that the back half of the camel tripped and took out a donkey and two shepherds. And then there was the time one of the Three Kings decided to fill his treasure chest with glass marbles. He was one of those boys prone to mischief so I'll never know if he planned it or not, but as he came forward to present his gift to the Holy Family the treasure chest spilled open and glass marbles bounced down the stone chancel steps, and rolled across the stone floor of the nave under the first five sets of pews. We were finding marbles over a year later.

The story of the birth of Jesus that is so often proclaimed in children's Christmas pageants is really an adult story about rival kings who compete in a life-and-death struggle for human hearts and souls. I think that we have sanitized what is really a scandalous story. If it were to happen today this baby would be born on a cold night to an unwed mother in the backseat of a broken down car on Washington Street in front of St. Francis House ... the homeless shelter ... because there were no beds left. And the scandal would not just be that the mother was poor, or didn't get to the hospital, or was refused shelter when she was about to deliver ... the scandal is that this child born in the back seat of a broken down car is the hope of the world ... this child is the holy one that the world has been waiting for. The same world that marginalizes and judges ... and condemns homeless people as if it is their fault and not the fault of the society they live in.

Remember, the birth of Jesus is not just one story, but rather two ... one in the Gospel of Luke that we heard this evening, and the other in the Gospel of Matthew ... and the two stories are different in some interesting ways. And, remember, in the Gospels of Mark and John there are no nativity stories at all. However, we do know that Jesus was a living human being, and therefore he was born of a mother into the human race. So, the question is, what is this holy night really about, and what might these stories be telling us.

On Christmas Eve ... every year ... we hear the story of the birth of Jesus from Luke's Gospel, so let me begin there. The setting in Luke is the world of the Emperor Augustus Caesar. As Emperor he was proclaimed "savior of the human race." It was in this context that another ... that is, Jesus ... came into the world and he was also called "savior" and he proclaimed a rival kingdom.

This is a clue to the violent plot of the story ... it is a rivalry that becomes a battle. Luke begins his account speaking of the emperor Augustus decreeing a "registration" or census for the purpose of taxation. In the world of tax-burdened peasants, this tax was highly oppressive and served only to support the occupying troops and the high living of the military leaders and governors. So, in the service of this emperor, and to fund Caesar's kingdom, Joseph and his betrothed pregnant Mary, were forced to travel the road to Bethlehem.

Thus the tension between the savior Caesar ... and the savior Jesus: Roman Empire on the one hand ... and Kingdom of God on the other; the so-called peace imposed by the Emperor on the one hand ... and the peace proclaimed by the angels on the other. It was a tension between salvation dependent upon mighty armies, high control, tyranny, excessive taxation, hierarchy and slavery, competing with a salvation that relied upon giving rather than taking, weakness rather than strength, losing rather than winning, on inclusion rather than building walls and drawing lines, upon egalitarianism in opposition to kings and princes.

It is, as well, Caesar's bullying domination at odds with Jesus' "peace" that liberates and sets free. A Roman kingdom of prestige and pretense, palaces and thrones, in contrast with Jesus' kingdom of nobodies and nothings ... people like tax collectors, prostitutes, lepers, the ill and disabled, and children ... a realm of throw-a-ways, and marginalized, and misfits who lacked all by the standards of Caesar ... yet had everything in the eyes of God.

This Jewish couple ... Joseph and Mary ... arrived in Bethlehem. There was no room at the inn. They were outsiders, obviously peasants, people on the margin who could not buy ... or bribe ... their way into a room, so they took refuge in a stable with the animals. And it was in a manger ... a feed trough ... that the swaddling baby was laid. The baby's welcome was by shepherds in the fields. No one, we should note, came out from Jerusalem. The absence of priests and those who served at the Temple in the story is telling. The baby Jesus was poised in opposition and threat to the twin powers of politics and religion.

This is an adult story that we have tamed for children ... children of a young age, and the child in each of us at any age. By being so sentimental, we trivialize this monumental tug-of-war for the human body and soul. But, I think we do so almost half knowing that we do it as self protection, as a way of avoiding its implications for us. The real question is not whether these things happened exactly like they are written, or if any of this is really true. The tougher and more important question is how it may still be happening ... how this might be your story and my story. And you and I know what that really means when one of those Christmas carols touches a deep chord inside our psyche and brings tears to our eyes.

On this night ... the Feast of the Incarnation ... we celebrate the divine spark of God coming alive in this world in the birth of Jesus. If the divine spark of God can come alive in him, it can come alive in each of us as well. Imagine, if you can, the divine spark of God that longs to be born in you. Recognize that this may be a part of you that is relegated to the edges and sidelines of your life ... even stuck out back in the stable with the dirty and smelly animals. Know this infant as that in you which has had no real place in the world you have carefully constructed and tended over the years ... there is no room in the inn, or at the office, or in the church, or even in your home around the dining room table.

Imagine that which is in you that is longing to come alive and has a different idea of how things ought to be and whose values are forged and rooted in a different kind of kingdom than the one in which you must work or study or even pray. Know that part of you that is sick to death of a peace that is based on might and power; on order and money and hierarchy; on fitting in and conforming to someone else's ideas ...and wants a new and different peace in its place.

Can you imagine a part of your soul ... your psyche ... that may not be fully formed yet but wants to be alive? Can you envision a part of you that would be more at home with dirty shepherds from the hillside than the people of your office or club? Can you picture a part of yourself that if it were to come alive might disturb those who think they know you the best ... distress those who love you the most ... maybe even disturb your own sense of security.

If this story is about you and me as well as about the birth of Jesus some 2,000 years ago, then it is about revelation: revealing at last to yourself and, if you are courageous and foolish enough, reveal to others who you really are, and what God is calling you to become. This part of you is the divine spark of God yearning to come alive. This is about incarnation: God the spirit being born in that virgin and hidden part of yourself ... in flesh and blood still aching and longing for what it means to be fully human and fully alive.

The Feast of the Incarnation. The Nativity of Our Lord. The birth of Jesus ... the Christ child. Christmas. It is the gift of God's Son to the world, the divine presence ... the divine spark ... of God coming alive in human form. It is God's blessing upon us so that we, too, might be a blessing in return to God's world. What a glorious night in by this beautiful setting in wonderfully warm St. Augustine, Florida.

May the humility of the shepherds,

The perseverance of the wise men,
The joy of the angels,
And the peace of the Christ-child
Be God's gift to you this Christmas and always.
Amen.