

What is Christmas?
Luke 1:26-38; John 1:1-14,16,18
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Advent 4 – December 21, 2008

luke 1:26-38

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, 'Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you.' But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob for ever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.' Mary said to the angel, 'How can this be, since I am a virgin?' The angel said to her, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God.' Then Mary said, 'Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.' Then the angel departed from her.

John 1:1-14,17-18

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.

Christmas is nearly here.

Our stockings are hung, baking is done and there are a few tentative presents under our tree, with big brother daily counting them and gingerly holding the ones that say O W E N for a few longing minutes every day, and keeping watch over the rest against dogs and sisters.

When Christmas comes, we will be up well before the sun, keeping presents at bay for as long as it takes to eat a small first breakfast so there are no hunger tantrums during the festivities, then have a big breakfast afterwards and spend the rest of the day playing inside and outside and watching Christmas movies.

Some will be at big family dinners with several generations crammed in a small and happy dining room and the smells of family recipes filling the air. Some will sit in slippers in the peaceful silence of the new snow and the quiet phone and the Yule log on the television. And all that is as it should be. Christmas is supposed to be a time for laughter and joy, for

relaxation and excitement, a time for intentionally putting aside petty differences and appreciating one another, for good food and the spirit of giving.

But we have four more days of Advent. That strange, reflective season of anticipating Christmas. And this year especially, Advent has been very real, almost alive for me. We've watched the tension in the economy, the slump in Christmas shopping, the ways people are approaching Christmas a little more realistically and a little more subdued. And the different tenor in the air opens up the chance to connect to something deeper, to enter into a real exchange, an encounter with God that makes Christmas meaningful instead of frivolous.

We've anticipated Christmas in many ways these past weeks – in lament and brokenness, in hope that comes from honestly recognizing our need for a Savior. We've anticipated the peace of Christmas in the courage to imagine things as they could be, as they will be, and the power of speaking that out. We've symbolically represented our own brokenness in this growing mosaic, and seen how joy springs from the cracks of our brokenness, as God's surprising grace startles us with small miracles of completeness. Then this week we had a Blue Christmas service, and recognized how our tears and our grief water the places in our lives where joy grows, and how God uses all of it to bring life.

Christmas is nearly here, and we've been waiting, preparing, anticipating it. But what is Christmas? And what difference does it really make in our lives? In our world? So today we ask, what is the story of Christmas, really? We are sitting here because we believe Christmas is a story beyond the saint who loved children and gave gifts to the poor and became immortalized as Santa Claus. But Christmas is also a story beyond the stable and the star, the nativity scene figurines, pageant shepherds, pretty carols and the sweet and domestic tale of no crib for a bed.

Christmas is a story of cosmic, eternal proportions, that begins before earth and time. In the still darkness of nothing, the Word speaks existence into being, BE! And creation comes alive. It is God's design, God's invention, which reveals God's creativity and love continually in every changing and growing thing, in every twist of a tree limb and song of a bird. It is full of the life of God, but it does not know God. And the crowning achievement of all creation are the ones made in God's very own image. Yet they do not know God. They are living in darkness, they are lost, in pain, locked in conflict, and overshadowed by death, which eventually will claim them all.

And here comes the plot twist of Christmas. God does the most dramatic thing God can do for those God loves, God joins them, as one of them. The Word becomes flesh. The creator and sustainer of life gasps his first breath as the son of a human woman. The Word that spoke creation into being now bawls from the mouth of a wordless, helpless, infant.

But this event was hardly a gala. There should be trumpets and a red carpet, the Kings and rulers of all the nations should be gathered, everyone should be told it is coming. Mary should have the best care and comfort, surrounded by people tending to her every need;

Joseph should be given a palace in which to raise the baby Jesus. Everyone should come and fall on their face before God. God whose love would not let us go.

But it doesn't happen that way. When the sovereign King of all creation plunges into the earth, naked and squirming, it is into a stable, surrounded by animals, because there is no room for them in the inn. It is his earth, his home, his creation, and yet they do not recognize him. He will be welcomed by the unmarried girl in whose womb he was formed, and held by the man who stood by her to be his daddy. Shepherds will stumble down from their hill and look on him with awe, and strangers will journey from a distant land and keep the secret of his coming.

And the rest of the world will keep on sleeping.

Love incarnate. The Christmas moment. A seemingly insignificant moment, a moment like millions of others, a child enters the world. His story is yet to be written, but also like every other story, it is already written- the child will grow, will learn. He will know love and loss, suffering and joy. Gradually the child will become an adult. And one day, the child will die. God took on the story of every human; God stepped into the experience of every human. This moment is unlike any creation and the cosmos has ever witnessed. Its creator has crossed the barrier and entered its midst. This moment tears out the end of the human story and rewrites it.

On Christmas morning, the baby Jesus nestled in his swaddling clothes, it all lies in front of him. The people he will touch, the lives he will heal. The words he will someday speak of God's kingdom, in language he has yet to learn. And on that Christmas morning, the end of his human life was far away- the day the ones he created would betray him, the day they would violently snuff out his life. The day death would have its last victory. No one there knows that this tiny baby will break the power of death forever. That he will rise from the dead and defeat darkness once and for all. On Christmas morning he is a new baby, like every other new baby, but the moment the infant Jesus drew his first breath, God changed the direction of eternity forever- God committed in flesh and blood to deliver us from darkness and death. Love came down.

God entered in. God became Emmanuel, God with us.

Awake from your slumber all creation! Hear the news! God is with us! Hear the power and the magnificence of the subversive act of Christmas. God did not smite death down from above; God did not simply eliminate suffering and pain and make life easy and safe. God crawled inside of bones and skin, and let life beat him up too. God let himself bleed and laugh, run and weep, touch a human face with a human hand. This is the Love of the Creator – to share life completely with creation, from within, to join us fully. **God let Godself be weak and in that weakness- even to the point of death - God redeemed us.**

We look around ourselves some days, and it is hard to feel hopeful. There is so much violence and suffering, so much gluttony and hunger, scarcity and waste. We are selfish people, and fearful, and selfishness and fear seem sometimes to rule the world.

This week I read a moving reflection by Alfred Delp, a Jesuit priest, written just before Christmas 1944, and shortly before he was hanged by the Nazis. He writes of the all-consuming darkness in the world, in a time when there seemed to be no hope of any redemption – evil seemed to have won. In his prison cell, his own life on the line and listening to the horror happening outside the bars of his window, he seizes upon the Advent message: John, the voice crying in the wilderness to prepare the way, the angels announcing to Mary what was coming, and Mary herself agreeing to be used by God.

“The gray horizons must grow light.” He writes, *“It is only the immediate scene that shouts so loudly and insistently. Beyond these things is a different realm, one that is now in our midst. The woman has conceived the child, sheltered it beneath her heart, and given birth to the Son. The world has come under a different law. We are not speaking only of historical events that happened once, on which our salvation rests. Advent is the promise denoting the new order of things, of life, of our existence.”*

In the shadow of a demonic evil, there is no place for a sweet or shallow comfort. Instead, in the Advent of a Christmas morning that will dawn with the same dark scene engulfing him, this priest finds real, concrete and living hope. An everlasting hope that spans beyond what we can see here and now before us.

He says, *“Let us live in today’s Advent, for it is the time of promise. Space is still filled with the noise of destruction and annihilation, shouts of self-assurance and arrogance, the weeping of despair and helplessness. But just beyond the horizon the eternal realities stand silent in their age-old longing. There shines on us the first mild light of the radiant fulfillment to come.”*

Christmas calls us to a brave and fierce hope. A tenacious and courageous love. A bold repentance and a generous forgiveness. Because a light shines in the darkness, and the darkness cannot overcome it.

For some this Christmas will be a noisy and joyful affair, families will be up at the crack of dawn, the first lights turned on will be the tree lights. Parents will stay in their slippers and robes and sip from coffee mugs as their kids scamper about them, grandparents will come to the door stomping boots and carrying packages and the house will soon be a sea of paper torn wildly off boxes.

For others Christmas will be at time of loneliness and grief, where the pain of life is especially poignant and raw in the shadow of other’s joy this season. For the woman whose husband of 50 years has passed on, for the man whose divorce keeps him far from his young children. For the son exhausted from caring for his aging father, watching him slip away slowly. For those whose sons and daughters will spend Christmas in a war zone far from home and family.

And for many, Christmas will simply be a let-down. There will be that vague sense of guilt for the folks that got left off the list in this year of scaled-back buying, somebody will have to work because we’ll take any hours not to get laid off. The kids will spend the holiday with the in-laws instead this year, the presents wont be what the grandkids really wanted,

the food will get burned, and nobody will get along. Because Christmas is just a day. It is just a day of cultural festivity that ends when the sun goes down.

But for all these people, and for everyone on earth this Christmas, whether they slumber through Christmas or not, there is something beyond the day, beyond the lights and carols and yes, even beyond the manger and the memory of a historical event. Something within the fabric of the universe itself that has been completely altered forever and can never be shaken.

Love has come. God is here.

God is with those today who suffer, and those who celebrate. God is with us all.

In all its mystery and simplicity, Christmas guarantees that no matter what the day brings, no matter what this life brings; God is with us. And sin and fear and death will not have the final word. Today we come together to remember that in all its messy, bizarre, and unnoticed glory, on Christmas morning the light entered the world, and the darkness cannot overcome it.

We have four more days in the twilight of Advent. Four more days to feel the waiting, notice the need, cry out with a world in pain, "Come Lord Jesus!" And then on Christmas, we will welcome again the glorious news that wrapped in the bundle of a flesh and blood, our God joined us in this life –Love has come and we are being saved, thanks be to God!

Amen.