Christmas Eve 10 PM

December 24, 2018

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All Saints’, Wolcott

*“Do not be afraid; for see – I am bringing you news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.”*

Every Vestry meeting begins with prayer and a reflection on a biblical phrase or some theological statement which relates to each of us in the room – not just to us as individuals, but to us as a Vestry, elected to exercise the ministry of stewardship of the congregation (the care and feeding of the congregation, if you will). Each month, I try to choose material for our reflection which reflects the season of the Church Year or some approaching event related to the Church and our spiritual life. So it was that last week, at the December meeting, I asked the Vestry (in advance) to reflect on the Incarnation, and what difference it makes in their lives. “How does it change your life?” I asked. I thought it would consume about 2 minutes of discussion about Christmas and the birth of Jesus. I was wrong.

After about 15 minutes of spirited conversation about how grateful people were to have God in their lives (nothing wrong with that, of course!), almost *no one* had mentioned Jesus! So I tried again. “What difference does Jesus make in your life?” I asked, a little more pointedly. As they searched their minds and hearts in silence for answers, I suggested that they meditate on that question during the week following (which ends tomorrow, in the clear light of Christmas Day). I asked a few others, in a random sampling, over the next few days, with the same response. It seems to me that we are all too quick in our prayers and in our discussion to refer to - or call upon – the Almighty God alone, that great Mystery which is almost beyond our understanding; yet, in the Gospel of John, we hear that “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.” Since God is Love, Jesus then shows us what Love looks like. In the Gospels, Jesus reaches out to all, leaving no one excluded in his embrace of mercy and justice in his outpouring of generosity, compassion, forgiveness, and love.

John tells us that Jesus is the very Incarnation (the flesh-taking) of the creating love of God – the Word which God spoke at the beginning of Time transformed into visible, tangible Love; love which looks deep and sees the good in people, even when they are at their worst, and still forgives them. Love which reaches out to serve both the lowliest and the mightiest. Love which shows us human beings all that we are created to be. Jesus shows us the love of God.

According to Luke, the angel Gabriel, at the Annunciation to Mary of her pregnancy, says “the child to be born will be holy; he will be called the Son of God,” and says, “you will name him Jesus.” Jesus – which means “he will save.”

If there were no other reason to know or care about Jesus, it is that one thing: Jesus, the Son of God, is our Savior. He came to earth to save us from our sins and save us for life everlasting with him in the heavenly realm.

He is God’s Christmas gift to the world, Love wrapped not in glitz or glamor, but in the ordinariness of human flesh. From Eternity, he entered Time and Space on earth, not as a royal-robed emperor god or warrior king, but as a tiny, helpless, squalling child “wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.” From his birth on, he knew every situation that humans know – he knew joys and sorrows, pain and pleasure, fear and faith; he knew what it was to be hungry, to be homeless, to be a refugee, to be rejected, to work hard, to have friendships and foes; he knew what it was to be a prisoner; he was born and lived and laughed and loved and died, just as all human beings do. And then, because he was also God, he did the one thing that no other being had ever done – he rose from the dead to bring new and everlasting life beyond the grave to all; to deliver us from our greatest fear - the ultimate power of sin and death - and open for us the way to heaven.

That’s what Jesus means to me, and I hope to you, as well. Our ordinary life is transformed by the flesh-taking of Love. The Incarnation of God – the Word-made-flesh - for our salvation, could do all of those things only by becoming one with us as one of us, that we might one day be one with him. That is the promise of Salvation. In the tough times and places of this old world, when tsunamis and forest fires and economic crises and greed and illness and death and wars and violence of all kinds –when all these things try to overtake us and hold us captive to the evils of anger and fear, that is the promise that wins the battle and brings hope and courage and trust in the living God. This promise comes to us in the birth of Jesus, the Christ, the Holy Child of Bethlehem.

The 16th Century poet, Robert Southwell, penned this powerful description of the new-born Jesus, which Benjamin Britten later set to music in his “Ceremony of Carols.” Hear this truth:

This little babe, so few days old,

Is come to rifle Satan’s fold;

All hell doth at his presence quake.

Though he himself for cold do shake,

For in this weak unarmèd wise

The gates of hell he will surprise.

. . . . .

My soul, with Christ join thou in fight,

Stick to the tents that he hath pight;

Within this crib is surest ward,

This little babe will be thy guard.

If thou wilt foil thy foes with joy,

Then flit not from this heavenly boy.

And 200 years ago tonight, priest and poet Joseph Mohr provided an even simpler text which endures to this day:

Silent night, holy night, shepherds quake at the sight,

Glories stream from heaven afar, heavenly hosts sing alleluia;

Christ, the Savior is born!

Christ, the Savior is born!

Merry Christmas.