

December 27, 2015

“What Child Is This?”

Sermon by Rev. Robert English



Luke 2:1-20

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good 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.” And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!” When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.” So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

What a beautiful day as we give God thanks and praise and we welcome Ryder, this beloved child into the family of faith the church. What a joy it is to witness the wonder of new life, to celebrate God’s amazing grace for Ryder in his baptism, during this Christmas season.

And yes, it is still Christmas!

We have spent the last few weeks preparing, and preparing and preparing and preparing. We’ve attended parties, hosted parties, bought presents, wrapped presents, made travel plans, cleaned guest rooms, prepared meals, prepared ourselves for time with family and friends.... and now here we are on December 27th.

For some Christmas has already come and gone and it’s on to the next thing, New Year’s Eve and new life resolutions.

Is this you? Does it feel like Christmas is already over?

My wife Allison was in a store the other day when she came across a package of cocktail napkins that said celebrate the 12 days of Christmas! She thought, wow how refreshing and yet upon closer examination she saw that there were 25 napkins each labeled from December 1st to December 25th.

If you are confused you are not alone, we were too. It doesn’t make sense mathematically or liturgically, how do you get from 12 to 25?

For some, and you know who you are, Christmas came really, really early this year, in fact it came on Thursday December 18th with the release of Star Wars: The Force Awakens. This movie became, for some, the light that shines in the darkness, the gift of a savior, a gift of hope that JJ Abrams could save the Star Wars franchise for a new generation. And if you haven’t seen it yet, it is simply incredible.

All of this points to something that we’ve come to know, something that we’ve all experienced year after year after year, in our world, and our culture.

Christmas has become an event on a calendar.

Christmas is a party that we plan for.

Christmas is a cookie that we make.

Christmas is something that has to be perfect or the whole thing is completely ruined.

Christmas is something that can be bought, given and received in shiny wrapping paper and beautiful bows.

And yet, here in the church we hold on to this outdated, irrelevant crazy notion that Christmas, the birth of Jesus, Emmanuel, God with us, Christmas is a way of life, Christmas changes our world, Christmas is a revolution and revelation.

Because at Christmas we celebrate the most radical and confounding thing humans beings have ever claimed:

God, the source, the divine creator, the first moved mover of the entire universe, God, the cosmic flow of creative, life-giving love and goodness, became human, became incarnate, and dwelt among us. In the birth of Jesus, we have come to know that which was once invisible, Jesus is God’s self-revelation of grace, a gift, given freely, for the whole world.

Christians have made this claim generation to generation that the Word of God is Jesus, the word made flesh, not a book, not a set of dogma or systematic belief structure, but a rhythm of life rooted in the way of Jesus, the way of humble-sacrificial-life-giving love.

This morning as we heard the story of Jesus' birth from the gospel of Luke and some of us might have thought how quaint, how lovely, how wonderful, I sometimes hear the voice of Linus from the Peanuts Christmas movie reading, for unto you a child is born, a savior who is Christ the Lord.

It is a wonderful story, in fact we call it the gospel, the Good News.

For it is a story of the subversive revolutionary nature of God's love. It is an unbelievable story about a journey of two poor and marginalized people, under the rule of an oppressive empire that only recognized the power of coercive violence and fear. This young couple journeyed to a little village to be counted as legal citizens and upon arriving the soon to be new parents, could not even find a place to stay for the night. They were outcasts, pushed to the fringes and forced to find a stable and to stay with the animals.

This is where our God came to be with us, this is where God enters into our world and our human story, this is where Jesus drew his first breath and with this act, forever changed the trajectory of human history.

We could no longer see those who are on the outside as less than human, as people without value or worth because this is where God's love and grace are revealed, this is where God makes God's home to reside with us, among the lost, the forgotten, the weak and the powerless.

How fitting, wonderfully simple, and human it is that God chose to come to us as a baby, because the birth of a baby changes everything, and I mean everything.

I was on Facebook on Christmas Day, in between Christmas meals when I came across this beautiful picture of the holy family, baby Jesus in a manger, crying, wailing; Mary and Joseph passed out sitting upright next to the baby and the caption said: Day 2.

The birth of a child completely disrupts your life, flips everything upside down, reveals just how self-centered we can be at times and reminds us of this simple truth, no matter how prepared you feel, things will always go off script and will always get a little messy.

Babies are completely and utterly dependent, needy, they are exhausting and demanding, they take over control of every different part of your life, and it is all completely and totally worth it, right?

It's like this line from a prayer to God that John Wesley the founder of the Methodist Church once penned, "I am no longer my own, but I am thine, put me to what thou wilt."

I imagine this is probably what Mary and Joseph each felt toward Jesus. They were the first people to experience a total transformation in their lives, because of him. They were the first to let go of their own will and agenda and to hand it over to this tiny, vulnerable, infant savior-king, God's grace made flesh. They were the first to experience the disruptive way that God's love seeps into your life and flips everything upside down. They were the first to follow Jesus, to adopt his rhythm of life, to follow in his way of humble-sacrificial love, because being a parent means giving yourself away for the sake of another. Jesus would later say said there is no greater love than this, to lay down your life for another.

This question we are left with during this Christmas season, what does this child mean for you? From what do you need Jesus' saving grace? In what way is God disrupting your life with revolutionary love?

Maybe it's time to forgive that person you've been resenting these last few years, let Jesus break those bonds and set you free.

Maybe it's time to share that grief you've been holding inside with someone you trust, to find rest and peace when you lay your burdens down.

Maybe it's time to give your fear over to God, whatever or whoever you are afraid of, let God's love cast out all your fear, to hear the words of the angel who says Be not afraid - for I give you good news of great joy for all people.

Maybe it's time to give a little bit of yourself away, or maybe some of your stuff away, because when we do this we find the fullness of life.

Maybe it's time to give up your hope of perfection, to embrace the messiness of life and trust and know that God meets us there, that is God already dwelling there and has made room for us all, with our savior child, Jesus Christ full of grace and truth.

Thanks be to God. Amen.