

Christmas Day, December 25, 2025

St. Andrew's Church, Kitchener

Holy Eucharist(BAS); 10:00 a.m.

Revised Common Lectionary:

Luke 2:1-20

(Isaiah 9:2-7, Titus 2:11-14)

Preacher: Gerry Mueller

[Full disclosure. This sermon was first preached on Christmas Eve 2003 in St. Bede's Chapel, Renison University College. After it became clear that Canon Wendy Fletcher would not be able to preach today, I brought it up to date, as needed.]

In these last few days hospitals have emptied; shops have filled; aeroplanes, trains, buses and roads have been jammed; radio stations, each seeking a unique "sound", all sounded alike playing carols, religious and secular. Almost every television programme on every channel, whatever its normal plot, had a Christmas setting. Families gathered; service organisations struggled to take care of the poor and the homeless; relationships were nurtured by cards, letters, telephone calls. In a society which likes to think of itself as secular and non-religious, these fleeting few hours called Christmas profoundly affect our and everyone's lives! Why does Christmas have such incredible power to transform? What is it that affects us in almost every aspect of our existence?

Why? What? Of course, there are many reasons. If we feel cynical, we say that Christmas as we know it is the creation of greedy commercialism. If we feel intellectual, we can chat about an ancient mid-winter holiday celebrating the beginning of longer hours of daylight being coopted by Christians. The literary-minded might throw Charles Dickens into the conversation, as the creator of Christmas as we know it in his novels. But truth is, none of

these, on their own or together, could achieve what has happened in the last few days.

The power of Christmas is in the **birth of a child**. It is a particular child, born to a particular woman, in a particular place, at a particular time. It is the birth of a child given a particular name, commanded by an angel, Yeshua - Jesus. **We**, each one of us, must decide in our own time, in our own way, in our own heart, whether or not we wish to add the further title, **Christ** - the anointed one; the Son of God!

What happened at that birth? Only one of the four evangelists struggles to describe the undescribable; Luke, whose story we have just heard. Mark doesn't mention it. Matthew does, but in only one brief verse, as we heard last Sunday, Advent 4. Matthew tells us much more of the coming of the magi - the Epiphany story, which actually happened 18 to 24 months later. John does not describe a birth; he writes about the coming into the world of this child in cosmic terms, putting this event at the centre of the meaning of the universe. Only Luke, of all the canonical evangelists (there are other early Christian authors whose descriptions of this birth did not make it into the Bible, mostly because they are very bizarre), only Luke struggles with describing **mystery**, the birth of God in human form, God entering creation in order to redeem it.

Luke takes the trouble to describe the ordinary, human setting. He does not begin "Once upon a time, long ago and far away." This

birth may have timeless and universal meaning, but it is a very real event. Luke describes it as happening when particular rulers ruled, during a census that we know happened, in a town we know existed. In that town there was a real inn, which had no room, and there was a real stable (probably a cave rather than a hut), with real animals and straw and smells, in which the baby was finally born. While Luke gives no other details, we can be sure this birth involved real pain, and real blood, and real cries from the newborn child. And with no cradle, his mother laid him in a manger, on real straw.

But even though Luke puts all this emphasis on the ordinary, on the "human-ness" of this birth, he cannot stay only in the material world. Luke knows this birth goes beyond the ordinary, and breaks out of time and space. This birth has meaning for all times and all places. And so, Luke turns to prophetic language, and the symbols used in his culture to describe the great significance of an ordinary event. Luke gives us the song of the angels, which connects earth and heaven, humanity and God, time and eternity. "*I bring you news of great joy which will come to all people. To you is born today ... a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord,*" declares an angel. And a heavenly chorus adds, "*Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those whom he favours.*"

And yet, reality is not long suspended, for the song of the angels is heard by real shepherds, in a real field, keeping watch over real sheep. Luke does the best he can to describe the undescrib-

able. But it is no accident that early Christians very quickly turned to the most poetic of the ancient prophets, Isaiah, to describe the meaning of this event:

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shined. . . . To us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government will be upon his shoulder, and his name will be called "Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace."

You can almost hear it sung, to Handel's Messiah setting.

When the early Christians looked at a passage such as this, they saw in it everything they believed about the child of Bethlehem. He was the light that shines in the darkness, that the darkness cannot overcome. He was the one to rule the nations. He was very God in human flesh, but with human limitations, come to live and die a human life and death, and thereby to redeem humanity. He was the one who would bring peace, God's *shalom* to the world.

St. Paul, writing to his pupil Titus, reaches for yet another image to describe the significance of this birth. "*The grace of God has appeared for the salvation of all,*" he writes. This birth is God's grace, God's gift of salvation for humanity, freely given, yet a gift beyond price.

We have looked at a feast of images. None of them, by itself, fully tells what Christians believe to be the meaning of the birth of this child in Bethlehem. Perhaps it is a meaning that can never be described, in human words, in all its fullness. But sometimes we

can gain the profoundest meanings in the simplest way. Listen to the words of the carols we sing today. Each of them, in a very simple way, offers a wealth of meaning. Or, spend some time standing in front of a *crèche*, even the one in the cave of the space underneath our altar. It is so simple that a child can instantly understand what is being shown, yet it is so profound that an adult too can turn away fully satisfied. (Some years ago I visited Montreal in December, and went to an annual exhibition of over 300 *crèches*, from more than 3 centuries and from all the world, at St. Joseph's Oratory. I left amazed, astounded at the breadths and depths and heights of imagination and art that this **one** event, the birth of **one** child, has stimulated in countless people.)

What does Christmas **communicate**? This feast has so many layers of meaning, we have to remind ourselves of what is underneath them all. To say that Christmas isn't about going home, or gift giving, or being kind, or wishing people well, is not to dismiss these things. Yet at the heart of Christmas, and underneath all the layers of images, **is** the child in the manger. But even that does not get to the core of the matter. To lift Christmas to the level of faith, we ask the deceptively simple question: "What child is this?" And in faith the Church answers, "This child is Christ the Lord; this child is God in human flesh."

With such language, we leave the sentimentality of Christmas behind and state an awesome fact, make an awesome claim. It is ironic that

all those carols we love so much, which have become so much our society's background to Christmas that we don't even hear what they are saying, take this fact for granted. Simply, carols, the ones originating in the church, **just assume** that the child born at Christmas is God!

Why is it so important to make **this** claim of divinity for **this** particular child? First, because Christians have claimed this from the very beginning of their faith, perhaps 30 to 35 years after the birth of this child, after the first Easter. The understanding that the child of Bethlehem is God in human flesh is one of the foundations of the Christian faith. But secondly, the claim of divinity for this child is the single greatest contribution of the Christian faith to the world. We bring the world the good news that the divine has entered the human, that God is present, and acts in human history.

Why is this important? Very simply, if we, if men and women are to be able to live within history, in spite of its dark pages and its terrors, we and all humanity need the assurance that God shares history with us. To believe that God has entered history as Mary's child is to know that God is not infinitely remote, looking from beyond time and space on our struggling, self-threatening species.

To believe that God became human as Mary's child is to believe that the author of the cosmic play in which we are actors has stepped into the play, and acts with us. And to accept that when God came

onto the human stage, he did not choose a glamorous, grandiose, heroic part, but instead chose to come as a child, to live as a servant, a reconciler, a healer, a peacemaker, and finally to die as a common criminal, makes his entry into our history all the more wondrous and hopeful.

That is precisely why the early Christians very quickly began to use yet another image to describe the undescribable. They would use an ancient Jewish word to describe Jesus, saying that he is *Emmanuel*, which means, "God with us!"

Well, what if you are not quite there yet, or if you are not even close to that level of faith and belief? What if for you Christmas is still mostly a celebration of good will, and family, and the giving of gifts, or even just a commercial orgy of buy, buy, buy - give, give, give? What if you are still struggling with faith in a God incarnate-in human flesh-or have given up the struggle, because it is all too unbelievable or abstract? That's alright too, because the truth of nothing I have said depends on human belief, or your co-operation, understanding, consent, or participation; nor, for that matter, mine!

It is **all** God's doing, God's gift-(the fancy theological name for all that is grace). No matter what you and I understand or believe, or are willing to at least consider or entertain, **the baby is nevertheless born, and the angels still sing!**