

Year ABC: Christmas Eve Lessons & Carols + John 1:1-14
St. Barnabas, Florissant – December 24, 2019

Focus Sentence: Christmas is REALLY about a little, newborn, REAL baby.

I offer these thoughts in the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

So, it's Christmas! Christ's feast. First Nowell. Holy Night. O Night Divine.

This is the night we celebrate the birth of Jesus, God's only Son and the long-awaited Messiah. It's the night we celebrate the coming of God in some wonderful and mysterious way into the very heart of human history.

PAUSE

Human history --- and a very long history it is. In tonight's reading from Genesis, we heard the very beginnings of human history recounted. We heard how we humans turned rebellious from the very beginning, wanting to be like the God who made us. And after the dirty deed was done, we heard the promise of an ever-loving God, that God would put enmity between the serpent-tempter, and the human child of the woman. That promise is fulfilled on this holy night.

PAUSE

In our readings from Isaiah, we heard other promises from God, that a son would be given for us, and that from the stump of Jesse a new shoot would come forth, and that shoot would cause the whole earth to be full of the knowledge of the Lord. And, tonight, those promises too are fulfilled.

In our two passages from the Gospel of Luke, the Evangelist puts a human face on it all --- setting this mysterious event firmly into the context of human history by citing the worldly rulers in power at that moment. But then, Luke goes on to turn the tables and Luke has this Messiah-king born in a cattle pen, and laid to sleep in a feed trough. Luke has lowly shepherds join the very host of heaven in proclaiming this special and holy birth.

PAUSE

So we're celebrating something very long-promised, very, very special --- very, very *important* --- tonight; the "reason for the season," as some of the billboards around town put it. But what IS the reason? What is this special something, this event which brings forth such celebration and fulfills all that long line of God's promises?

PAUSE

Well, here, I think, John can possibly help us. We heard the "prologue," the beginning of John's Gospel read, and in that prologue, John uses philosophical, but also very poetical, language in his attempt to describe this event. John speaks of a Word, John speaks of the very image and essence of God, and John says that this Word ("who not only was WITH God, but who WAS God") is WHO is made incarnate, who is enfleshed in this event we celebrate tonight, and who has come to "pitch his tent" among us humans.

PAUSE

But maybe none of those Scripture passages really work for you. Maybe what helps you to understand the significance of this night are less the things of the head, and more the things of the heart. Things like a darkened church, or the smell of evergreens in the air, or the sight of the scarlet poinsettias in the candlelight, or the beautiful poetry of the Christmas carols we sing tonight.

Those beautiful carols contain lots of very beautiful lines. Lines like “how still we see thee lie,” and “glory to the newborn King,” “royal David’s city,” ...”the promise of ages it then did recall.” Our hearts are filled with joy and moved with emotion when we sing or listen to those beautiful lines. And one particular hymn we hear a lot during the Christmas season especially strikes me; it’s “Away in a manger.” In that hymn there’s a line that asserts, “no crying he makes.” [Keep that thought for a bit.]

So all is still, and quiet, and joyful, and beautiful.

PAUSE

Is this then,the prophecies from the Hebrew Scriptures, the New Testament philosophy and theology of John’s Gospel prologue, the human story of Luke,and the sensual smells and sounds and sights of Christmas, is this what it’s all about? Is this the “reason for the season?”

PAUSE

Well, maybe so, but I’m going to rain on that parade just a little bit tonight, so bear with me as I retrieve some things that I want to show you and share with you....

Even when we can move beyond the secular commercialism of Christmas, beyond the fat man in the red suit and the eight tiny reindeer (and those things are nice things --- just not the real “reason for the season”) --- even when we can move beyond all that, we arrive at a place where our story has become so enmeshed in symbolism and loaded language, so wrapped up in the paper and bows and poinsettias and soft light, that maybe we still manage to miss the “reason for the season.”

Even focusing on that very human story in Luke, I believe that much of the truth of this event can be lost,and that’s the reason I brought this baby paraphernalia with me tonight.

When we hear Luke talk about “bands of cloth,” or what we traditionally translate as “swaddling clothes,” do we really hear the word, “diapers?” Because that’s what Luke’s talking about. And when Luke writes about a “manger,” do we really hear the term, “cattle’s feeding trough?” Because that’s what Luke is really writing about.

And when we hear, “Silent Night,” or “how still we see thee lie,” can we remember that this event we celebrate tonight is the birth of a baby boy who cried out because he was cold, or scared, or hungry? And, that no doubt Joseph and Mary were awakened from whatever sleep they could get among the straw and animals and barn mice at 2:00AM because this flesh-and-blood baby boy had to be fed?

PAUSE

Dirty diapers, 2:00am feedings, colic, burping, more dirty diapers --- that’s what we’re really celebrating tonight. And I want us to actually CELEBRATE these mundane things, because that’s what makes this night really special. Not because of masses of flowers, not because of angel choruses singing in the night skies --- because those are the trappings we might well expect to accompany the birth of a king, the kind of kings we humans usually think of.

No, our king, our God with us, incarnate in this newborn baby boy child, is much, much more than that kind of human king. Our king, with his dirty diapers and colic, and burping, and his crying at 2:00AM, our king is exactly like you and me. If he weren't, we would have an out; we could claim that we don't have to try and be like him because, well, after all, he isn't like us, and doesn't share our human flaws.

Under all those bows and wrappings, beyond the soft candle glow and masses of poinsettias, beneath the grand-sounding poetry of the Christmas carols, we find at last the "reason for the season," because we find a baby, no different from you and me and all the other babies we've known, and yet so much more than we can ever imagine. Emmanuel, God with us, and not just God WITH us, but God AS us, come to show us, his human sisters and brothers, how to be like God.

Now I think THAT'S *really* something to celebrate tonight!

AMEN.