

December 24, 2007

Christmas A 2007

Title: "Jesus Christ was born."

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart, be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my strength and my Redeemer. Amen.

Jesus Christ was born. The fact of his birth is the single most important element we need to hold in our thoughts and hearts right now. He was born. He didn't just appear as the fully developed adult we follow and love and worship. Jesus Christ was born. He started his life the way we all did—as a helpless baby completely dependent on others for his survival.

Having a baby changes your life forever. That is true whether you have the child by birth or adoption or even when you gain children by blending your family. Loving your children compels you to reorient your life—to change the way you live to accommodate the needs of this new arrival.

Who can explain the fierce connection, the bond that forms so quickly when the child is finally in your embrace? There is an undeniable human longing to love and be loved that defies explanation, but there is also no doubt that our need to love and be loved is strong and deep.

Joseph and Mary must have experienced that feeling at the birth of Jesus. Their feelings of love and desire to protect the Christ-child is no different, and no more or less intense, than our own experiences when we first feel the soft flesh of tiny hands and feet. The first time I held my son I was overwhelmed with love—and I thought I'd never have that much love for anyone else. Yet, the feeling was again present—astonishingly so—when I held my grandson Joshua.

Have you had a similar experience? It is one of the more universal human characteristics that crosses nations, cultures, races, and languages. All humans become addle-brained when we hold a baby that is ours—which we are connected to in some binding way.

This understanding of our common bond with Jesus Christ is an amazing gift. Can we come to terms with the significance of Jesus Christ's role in becoming human? And if we can agree that it is a gift—why is it that Jesus' birth *is* so significant? How is it that we benefit from this astonishing event?

The Son of God was born. What an amazing thing for God to do! What shall we make of a God who would deign to enter our time and space in such a manner? No pillar of fire, no parting of the sea, no grandiose trumpets or golden chariot delivering the savior of the world—no, just a little baby wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in a manger because there was no room in the inn.

God just doesn't ever do what we think or imagine God will do! God promises to send a savior—a light to shine in the darkness—but a baby? In Advent we sing, “Come Thou Long Expected Jesus”, and lo these many years later, we know to expect that Jesus will come as the baby we see in all the creches we've EVER seen. But at the time of Jesus' birth the savior they were expecting was not a baby.

All the messages from the prophets and all the stories they'd heard about the Messiah did not include the little detail that the Messiah would need to have his diapers changed and that someone was going to have to teach him to walk and talk and learn about his role in life from his parents.

But it is in those details that the gift God offers us, has its greatest significance for us as human beings. It's *in* the fact of our common bond as humans. God is no longer speaking through prophets. God is no longer sending Angels as messengers. God doesn't have to send earthquakes or floods or even rainbows to get our attention.

God is not up there, God is not in a parallel universe—distant from what we experience as humans. This night, this HOLY NIGHT, we gather to celebrate and honor that God is Emmanuel—God with us—more than with us—God *is one* of us! God, sharing our sorrows and our joys, God with us in our pain and disappointments, but more importantly—God leading us out of the darkness by sending Jesus to show us how to rise above our pain and sorrow.

God so loved the world that God came into the world so that we would have a path to life, and light, and love. God wanted to speak to us in the context of human experience and language. If we could only imagine the depth of that love! I wish I could fathom the love that would do so radical an act as to become human in order to show us the way.

Most of us can imagine a bit of that love, most of us have grasped an inkling of the love that God has for us—that's why this time of the year our hearts are full of love and generosity of spirit. There's something about this time of year that unleashes a desire to give. I think that something is our understanding that God loves us deeply, unconditionally, and unwaveringly.

Knowing that we are loved and accepted frees us to be generous and accepting of others. God's gift to us—becoming a human by being born into the human family—is unparalleled in the history of religious belief. Extraordinary!

Through this gift we know that we have the ability to rise above our circumstances. Through the birth of Jesus Christ as a human child we know that we have a share in the divine nature. Jesus doesn't exist on a heavenly plane in another dimension—Jesus' birth and life happened here—in our sphere of existence, therefore making it possible for us to follow the example of his life.

Jesus' birth as a human child must be the greatest gift God has ever bestowed upon us because now we know how good and wonderful we can be. Jesus Christ shows us our potential. In a sense, when God became human God re-oriented his existence to see to our needs.

Now, we have a chance to honor the birth of the Christ-child by reorienting our lives to live as the best people we can be. Through the birth of Jesus we see the heights that we can reach. We too, can be selfless, noble, patient, loving, accepting, and generous.

I think that's the most noticeable characteristic of the Christmas season—there is a palpable spirit of generosity. People actually enjoy giving at this time of the year. That may be why we say things like, "it's a magical time" or the song

whose lyrics say, “it’s the most wonderful time of the year”. What makes it special is the act of freely giving.

It is fun to give money away. I heard from some of our Outreach committee folks the other day and in separate incidents several of them commented that they had so much fun deciding how to give away the money raised at our fabulous rummage sale. Giving just makes you feel good.

Another of our wonderful church members came into an unexpected windfall and decided she wanted to send us several thousand to use, as we needed. The thing that made her gift so special was that she had no interest in designating it in anyway. She didn’t want to control any aspect of it—making it a true gift. She confided in me that she was having a ball deciding how to give the money away.

Generosity does something to us—the ability and desire to give freely—release something in us. Maybe it’s endorphins or something biological—there may be some kind of science that explains it. Science aside, I think that magnificent feeling of generosity and love allows us to enter a higher realm of existence.

Giving freely is one of the ways God gets to be God. Freely giving is a God characteristic and when we participate in the act of freely giving we catch a glimpse of what it means that we are made in the image and likeness of God.

O Holy Night, the stars are brightly shining—it is the night of our dear Saviors’ birth. Tonight we celebrate God’s willingness to become fully human and our ability to become more like Jesus Christ. May the blessings of Jesus’ love live in your hearts all year. AMEN.