

Christ the Lord Episcopal Church Pinole, CA

Christmas Eve: December 24, 2023

The Christ Child

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Good evening and Merry Christmas! Welcome to Christ the Lord Church on Christmas Eve. I am sure most of you know the Christmas story, but do you really know all the dimensions of the Christmas story?

On one hand we have a very real and human situation. We have Mary, an unwed mother companioned by Joseph, about to give birth in a building where animals were kept. We have, let us say, a less than amazing situation until the angels inform the shepherds that something Divine has occurred.

For those at that time, the idea that the Messiah had come was, for the Jewish people, the promise God had made to them. But when we meet him, he is a baby. Mary was exhausted but well, and I am sure, everyone was smiling and quiet. Then there were angels.

This child, witnessed by the shepherds, holds the potential beyond all expectations. Yet in God's kingdom and on earth something very real and tangible is taking place.

We have a baby, a newborn, that, as with all newborns, contains unlimited potential. This is just the beginning, this is just the start of God's promise and hope.

But it is not, as we know, the king who comes to see Jesus (as this too will eventually cause problems) but it is the poor working shepherds who are allowed to hear first what God has done. In this very human story of the birth of a Jewish baby boy, to a couple trying to do their civic duty and pay their taxes, who were not yet married, and

found themselves birthing in an animal's shelter, this is the real Jesus. This is also the reality of God, showing us God needs little to fulfill his desire for us.

We change when we behold a baby. We become tender. We become aware of our power in contrast to this fragile life. Our voices and bodies find a stillness lest we disturb the baby's sleep. If we are afraid, it is because we are afraid to cause harm, and not because we fear for ourselves.

When we become vulnerable to these feelings, we must realize this is what our hearts would be like had we stayed in Eden; before the division and dissent took hold. Before murder was on the mind of man. And so God bless the babies who remind us of our capacity for tenderness. This is why the story of Christmas will never cease to bring tears to our eyes and joy to our hearts.

But there is also another dimension, there is the Christ child. Have you contemplated on the Christ child, for he is part and parcel of the story as well. Let me clarify what I mean by the Christ child. For human Jesus, there was an end, for Jesus Christ there is no beginning or end. We are an Easter people, we are the resurrection believers, we believe God's kingdom will have no end.

I believe it is the Christ child we see when we open our hearts to others. It is the Christ child that is contained in the smaller, quieter times of our faith. Similar to the real Jesus, he holds out hope and displays God's grace, but the Christ child is not limited by human flesh. Most scholars admit they believe the real Jesus, that is the human boy - to be of Hebrew/Jewish lineage and typical of the Middle Eastern body frame and features.

But the Christ child can be who you need him to be; ethnicity, body structure, geographical origin need not matter. The day, time or year may not even matter, it doesn't even have to be Christmas.

During Lent and Easter we get a glimpse of the real Jesus, the teacher and rabbi, the miracle worker, the betrayed, crucified, dead and buried. The real Jesus shows us our humanity.

When we meet the Christ child, we meet the angels and the stars at his birth, we see the dove descending on the man Jesus, we see the transfiguration, and lastly, we see the resurrection. The Christ child shows us the hope of God beyond anything we can imagine. The real Jesus shows us our humanity, the Christ child shows us our Divinity.

The Christ child can be the babe of a hope you never had, the child whose dreams - which are really your own - may be nurtured, the sibling you can only dream of having. The Christ child can hold all the possibilities held within the Divine.

Gemma Galgani of the early 1900's stated, after having a vision of the Christ child, *"One evening while I was writing, I heard my name called. I turned and saw a Lady with a Child in her arms. She held the Baby out to me and I took Him. Then the Lady said to me, 'You, daughter, are healed and have received your health back, and therefore, I wish that you serve my Son in the Passionist Order.' Having said these words, She took the Child and blessed me."*

Now I don't imagine each one of us will have such an amazing vision or experience, or even desire to serve the ministry. But I do wonder what the world would be like if we have the hope, not only once a year of the real Jesus, but also of the everlasting Christ child that allows our hearts to remain open to all that is around us knowing God is in the plan.

As Dietrich Bonhoeffer reminds us. *"He comes in the form of the beggar, of the dissolute human child in ragged clothes, asking for help. He confronts you in every person that you meet. As long as there are people, Christ will walk the earth as your neighbor."*

This evening as you sit and think about what Christmas means to you, ponder the real human Jesus, and let that nativity scene in a shelter built for animals inspire you on the very real and human level to help bring peace into this very troubled world.

And after you are done with those thoughts, I pray you end your evening tonight, this Christmas Eve, with all the peace, faith, hope and love you can infinitely imagine when thinking and opening your heart to the Christ child. When you contemplate the grace of God, meditate on the humility of God, and the idea that with God, nothing is impossible. Merry Christmas, and Amen.