

CHRIST IS CHRISTMAS
Luke 2:1-20
Preached by Dr. Cahill
Babcock Presbyterian Church
Christmas Eve, 2011

I'm glad you're here tonight. You could be home right now having Christmas Eve dinner with family and friends or watching "It's A Wonderful Life" on TV or even wrapping the last of the Christmas presents.

For some of us church is a habit. We feel incomplete when we miss worship on Sunday morning and especially on a holy day like Christmas Eve. Christmas wouldn't be Christmas if we didn't come here to sing carols, hear the Christmas story retold and pray for the world. For others, maybe you're included in this group, church going isn't your habit and yet tonight you sensed that same divine tug the rest of us felt: to encounter the mystery of the incarnation, God becoming one of us, born in Bethlehem, the city of David in fulfillment of the ancient prophecies made hundreds of years prior to Christ's birth.

Quite frankly, I don't care whether you're a regular worshipper or not, because somehow I don't think God cares either. He's just glad you're here. And I say that because the first seekers who accepted God's invitation to worship the Christ child weren't members in good standing of the officially sanctioned religious establishment of their day.

I'm sure you're familiar with Matthew's story of the Wise Men from the East, who followed the star to Bethlehem because they had this bizarre notion they'd be led to a divine prodigy, whose presence in the world would ultimately change everything. But notice they were Gentiles, non Jews and astrologers to boot, and yet they felt that same divine tug to bring their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh in recognition of this child's destiny to be a prophet, priest and King who'd speak the truth, rule with justice, and above all bridge the gap between God and man by dying for the sins of the world.

How did these Wise Men know these things? I'm not sure they "knew" anything they just sensed God was up to something huge and through this child the world redeemed.

Then in Luke's gospel, we read the other nativity story about the very first visitors to the manger, who preceded the Magi by days, maybe even weeks. Mind you, these visitors weren't officials of a royal court, or the rulers of the Jerusalem temple. Instead, God chose to invite very common men, the shepherds who kept watch over their flocks by night - an odd choice, because shepherds weren't known for being reliably "religious" people. They were too busy and committed to leave their flocks to attend worship every week, and probably not very particular about keeping all the proscribed rules and rituals of the orthodox religious establishment. That's why they were generally ostracized by

the religious elites even though these very same shepherds faithfully provided the Temple with the unblemished lambs needed for the daily ritual sacrifices.

Even so, God invited these shepherds to be the first witnesses of the birth of God's only begotten son, the long-expected Messiah who'd be the answer to all the prayers asking God to restore glory and prosperity to Israel so she could reestablish herself as the light to all the nations of the earth.

But when Jesus of Nazareth finally did come, he proved himself a great disappointment primarily because Jesus wouldn't conform to their expectations. Jesus wouldn't defend the status quo, or endorse time honored traditions. He'd refuse to rubber stamp narrow-minded notions about God and he'd never compromise himself by telling people what they wanted to hear.

Instead Christ questioned mindless conformity and mediocrity. He opposed the status quo whenever it dehumanized people who didn't conform to the prevailing winds. To just about everyone's chagrin, Christ came to turn the world upside down so it would finally be right side up. Christ was born to birth a revolution, not a political/cultural revolution that would be too cheap and easy. Instead, Jesus was born to save the world, one life at a time.

Now after telling you about Christ and his mission to planet Earth I have a question, are you ready to take him seriously? Not will you mindlessly embrace organized religion, but are you willing to allow Jesus to become the center of your life?

"Ah," you ask, "Why should I bow down to Jesus? How can you claim Christ and Christianity are any better than Mohammed and Islam, the Buddha and Hinduism and any of the other great religious leaders and their faith traditions?"

It's not my intention to minimize anyone else's religion as long as the central principle of that faith is based on love, self-sacrifice and grace. I'd never claim, as some do, that all non Christians are damned. (For that reason alone I'm relieved that Christ himself and Christ alone will be sitting on the throne on Judgment Day and not those who claim to speak for him.) Anyway, how could anyone be so quick to judge people of other faith traditions knowing that the Wise Men from the East who practiced their own religions were among the first to worship the Christ Child?

What am I saying? Christianity isn't important? Certainly not! Christ himself is Christianity. Take a long look at Jesus, the prophet who told the truth, the King who surrendered his throne, the priest who sacrificed himself for the sins of the world, but on the third day was raised from the dead. Christ himself is Christianity and being a practicing Christian really means trying the best you can to become like Jesus by loving God, your neighbor and yourself.

You see, Jesus didn't pedal a religion of rituals, rules and regulations, instead Jesus revealed eternal truths, not just through his teaching and preaching, but mostly

through his Suffering Servant lifestyle, which by the way, you're being asked to follow so you too can become kind and compassionate, ready and willing, and never afraid to get your hands dirty or your hand slapped for doing or saying all the right things for all the right reasons.

So Christmas shouldn't be about being offended if a store clerk says "Happy Holidays" instead of "Merry Christmas." Christmas shouldn't be about insisting on your rights and privileges as Christian citizens. Yes, I grieve the encroaching secularism and get ticked off by Scrooges and Grinches who work to minimize any Christian influence in the public square, until I realize that as long as Christians keep Christ at the center of their lives and strive to become Christ-like in their dealings with coworkers, clients, students, shopkeepers, garage mechanics, car salesmen and, especially, the poor and down and out Christ will never be banished from any classroom, boardroom, shop or public square. You keep Christ in Christmas by keeping Christ front and center in you.

Christ was born, not to be the world's greatest philosopher, or the founder of a new religion. Christ wasn't born to pathetically plead, "Can't we all just get along?" one minute and give us an almighty guilt trip the next. Instead, Christ was born to save us from sin and death, or more to the point, to save us from ourselves. Christ was born so we can be reborn to the realities of the Kingdom not of this world, that same Kingdom where saints and sinners love and empower one another to seamlessly perform deeds of kindness and acts of love if only because we want to please God. Not impress or mollify God, but please God because somehow we've grown to love him and now we want to serve him.

I pray tonight when God visits you, through his latter day angels, you'll be freed just enough to celebrate God's glad tidings of great joy to all people: Christ is born not just for the world's salvation, but for yours as well. Christ loves you that much that he emptied himself so you would be filled with all the blessings and graces of eternity and then be ready to empty yourself for others never fearing God will leave you bone dry. And that's what Christmas is really all about.

Let us pray.

Christmas Prayer

Almighty God, on this silent, holy night, speak to us the same glad tidings of great joy heard by the shepherds and help us see the same heavenly signs seen by the Wise Men as both set aside their doubts and fears just enough to enter into the glorious mystery of Christ, who stepped out from eternity and into our world to allow us to understand, as much as humanly possible, who you are and what you want for us.

Father, help us grasp this simple truth when we gaze upon your son enthroned in his manger we see You, all powerful yet humble, mysterious yet approachable, the Lord of the Universe, yet the servant of humanity. We acknowledge we fear your awesome presence. Help us trust that your perfect love will overcome our fears as you invite us to

be your sons and daughters and Christ's brothers and sisters. Above all help us sense your invitation to intimate friendships with you and each other especially those who need to be comforted and affirmed in times of trouble.

As we celebrate this Christmas and keep our family traditions that evoke warm memories and feelings, don't allow us to stop there. Instead remind us to remember, seek out and love those for whom Christmas is darkened by heartbreak and loss. Inspire us to make the effort to reach out to people who need to be loved and help each of us dare to imagine ourselves in that role you have already prepared us to walk in. May the love that caused you to surrender and empty yourself for the good of the world empower us to go and do likewise.

Never let us get away with paying lip service next time you call upon us to deny ourselves for the good of the other. Inspire us to be generous in our giving in all ways. Teach us that scraping the bottom is better than giving off the top. Lead us beyond the inward journey of self-discovery until, like the shepherds and Wise Men of old, we end our journey at the manger only to see the Christ Child in all his magnificent lowliness. And we praise your Holy Name that as the Christ Child grew to adulthood he never lost that magnificent lowliness, instead he kept it, even when tempted to cast it off, so he could die for the sins of the world.

Lord God, two thousand years have come and gone and we still wait for Christ to come to bring peace and justice to the earth. While we wait for your emerging Kingdom we dedicate ourselves to alleviating pain and suffering, poverty and despair. Embolden us to be peacemakers, to speak the truth, love the unlovable, stand with the outcasts, stand against any evil, feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the sick and the prisoner. Instill the essence of the Christ Child in each of our hearts and keep us from being completely content until we've fulfilled our purpose in life and finally breathed our last before we ourselves step into eternity and finally see you face to face.