

Grace Church of West Feliciana Parish
Feast of the Nativity of our Lord

24 December 2017

I just celebrated my 10th year anniversary of priesthood in the Episcopal Church, which means that after counting about 10 years of ministry in the Roman Catholic Church as a seminarian and Chaplain, I have preached hundreds of sermons about Jesus of Nazareth's birth, life, ministry, death, resurrection, and continued life through the Church he left. And, yet, the birth of Jesus continues to fascinate me. Christmas evokes memories of longing, dreams of new beginnings, the joy of family reunions and celebrations, and the heartache of loss as we remember those who are no longer among us. Christmas brings with it the promise of new life and the anticipation of what might be possible for all of us in the new year. Christmas is the season of company parties, shop-until-you-drop trips to the malls, Christmas lights, beautiful decorations, delicious foods and sweets, and bright-colored presents under the tree. The music on the radio reminds us of jingle bells, snow, Santa Claus, and reindeer. And we all imagine, even if it is for a day or two, a world filled with peace and good cheer.

But, with all the glitter and beauty, this season also reminds me of the lost, the lonely, the many people in our cities and towns who will sleep under bridges and highways tonight, those who will be going to bed hungry, and those who feel forgotten and left behind. There are many among us who are alone, grieving, depressed, in hospitals, or incarcerated tonight. There are many who feel abandoned by a God they see as a merciless judge, always busy with his score cards and always ready to sentence them to an eternal life of separation from him. This God is like a fierce father who is impossible to please. His primary job as the God of the universe is to separate those who measure up from those who haven't and will never be able to please him totally and completely. This is an angry God who resents our freedom, feels slighted by our indifference, gets deeply offended by our doubts, and demands a pound of flesh from all of us before he can decide whether or not he loves us. This is a God many in our Church feel they must protect and defend, appease and pacify, speak for and sell to the impious, unrighteous, and non-believer. This is a God who is so insecure, he can't deal with our laments, our cries, our complaints, and our sorrows. This God demands blind obedience, unquestioned loyalty, irrational acceptance of myths and legends created by men, and the sacrificial offerings of shame, guilt, bewailing, and sorrow.

The birth we celebrate this evening is a complete, total, and indisputable rejection of the image of God I just painted. The baby born tonight presents conclusive evidence that God is on the side of humanity. God has not left us alone to our own devices, he is the lover of souls and the friend of sinners. This baby, whose birth is the most significant birth in the history of humanity, is good news for those who feel alone and abandoned. This baby is love incarnated into human flesh who comes to us with one purpose in mind - to save us from within, to bridge the

gap of separation between God and humanity, to announce a message of forgiveness and inclusion, to lead us home as only he can do.

I don't mean to deny the power of sin and evil and tell you that this sin doesn't offend God. What I am telling you today is that this baby is the solution to the problem of sin and evil. He will grow to become the Messiah of his people and he will destroy forever the hold sin has over the human heart. He will defeat forever the hopelessness and alienation many sinners feel. He will replace a spirit of rejection and enmity with a spirit of acceptance and fellowship. God and humanity will commune together in perfect love. God and humanity will accomplish the plan of salvation to bring all things and all people under the loving arms of a Savior who loves them to the point of death. This baby is the light a people who lived in great darkness needed, and he remains even today, the solution to our own darkness. This baby announces to the world this evening that God has not abandoned his creation, that the maker is deeply concerned for the well-being of his creatures, that we are precious in God's eyes, and that there is nothing God will not do to save us and to bring us safely home.

Now, let me tell you why I love this baby and the man he will become. He will change the rules of the religious game. He will remove human merit from the equation. Up until then and, sadly for many after then, salvation was a matter of human effort. We earned our way to heaven. The only way to please God was through our human actions, our piety, our rituals, and our sacrificial systems. And even after many sacrifices and acts of charity, we could never presume that we had done enough to please God. There was always a deficit to be made up. There was always a balance to be paid. There was always a wave of rejection we needed to feel ashamed over. There was always more we needed to do to please this insatiable God. And, because human merit was never sufficient to pay the full debt of our sin, humans felt under the thumb of an angry God, and knew that punishment always followed death, even if it was temporary punishment for those who came close to the goal, but didn't quite achieve it. Human effort was insufficient to please a God who demanded the impossible of us.

This baby will grow to become our Savior, taking all human anxiety and shame to the cross with him, taking all insufficiency to the cross with him, taking our sin to the cross with him. And from that cross, he whispered with thundering words, "It is finished! No longer will you feel alienated from a God who has always loved you more than you can imagine. It is finished! No longer will you have to spend your life in the treadmill of merit, trying to please God through your good works. It is finished! You are loved not because you are perfect, but because God loves perfectly. It is finished! All debts have been paid, all gaps have been bridged, all sacrifices have been offered, and the Law has been fulfilled. It is finished! Now, you are free to love in freedom, without shame or fear. Now, you are free to open your heart, soul, and mind to God in full assurance that God loves and hears his children, and is delighted when we turn towards him. It is finished! Now, all

humanity past, present, and future can come within the reach of God's loving embrace. Rich and poor, Jew and Gentile, male and female, young and old...

This baby will grow to become the cosmic equalizer! Those who accept him in heart, soul, and mind, soon find themselves reassessing all dualisms, questioning all judgmental views of humanity, rejecting all lines of demarkation that try to convince us that some humans are more worthy of God's love than other humans, some races are preferred by God over other races, and some social classes are blessed by God through wealth and prosperity, while other social classes are punished and made to suffer. Those who accept this baby and the Savior he will become soon begin to discover brothers and sisters in the faces they once considered enemies and adversaries. They soon begin to see themselves in humility as equal in worth to all other humans, children of the same loving God, accepted members of the same family, dear servants in the same vineyard, and inheritors of the same promises made to our ancestors.

This baby will make all the difference for us! But, this baby will also become a warning sign for all those seek to make religion a set of rules rather than a relationship with a loving God. This baby will be a warning sign for those who seek to serve institutions rather than God's people. This baby will oppose those who will seek to build empires in his name on the backs of other humans. This baby will remind us that God delights in dethroning the mighty and lifting up the lowly. This baby will remind us that God meets us where we are because his love surpasses all understanding. This baby will invite us to love until it hurts, to forgive until we forget, to hope in the impossible, to believe in mystery because God himself is mystery, to reconnect with our incredible capacity to create, to fill our souls with whatever is pure and good and joy-producing, to lift up our sorrows to God in prayer knowing that God hears the cries of his people, and to dream of tomorrow when Messiah will return to make all things new and to create a just and loving world.

I pray that tonight you will open your heart and soul to this baby, because this child makes all the difference in the world. May he continue to bless you. Amen!