

Sermon for December 24, 2014 (Christmas Eve) 9 PM only
Offered by Nathan Ferrell at The Episcopal Church of Saint Mary

Texts: Titus 3; Psalm 98; Luke 2:1-8

Title: Who Is This Man?

What child is this, who laid to rest, on Mary's lap, is sleeping?

Whom angels greet with anthems sweet, while shepherds watch are keeping?

My dear friends: On this beautiful night, I invite you to reflect with me for a few minutes on the astonishing effects that this birth has had upon the human race.

You know, it is difficult for us to see these effects, since we live on the other side of history.

As this night has swept across the globe, every single nation on earth has heard the sounds of celebration and singing, all rejoicing in the birth of this Holy Child.

Listen, please: even if you lack certainty about the claims for the divinity of Jesus, at the very least you must recognize the historical truth that, since the birth of this Child, the entire world has never been the same.

John Ortberg is a Presbyterian pastor who has helped to summarize all of these effects in his book called "Who Is This Man?: The Unpredictable Impact of the Inescapable Jesus" (Zondervan Publishing, 2012).

Tonight and tomorrow, we will all participate in any number of family traditions and special events, but let us not lose sight of how incredibly ironic and logically ridiculous this entire celebration truly is!

It is a common proverb now that history is written by the victors.

But this Jesus born in Bethlehem lived as a poor working-class man, and he died as a complete loser by every possible definition. Yet, today, the history of the entire world is counted by the years since his birth!

This Jesus who grew up in Nazareth had no formal education. He never wrote a single book.

And yet, our entire system of education is based upon his insistence that truth sets us free, and that every single person is worthy of honor and respect, and that we are to love God with all of our minds.

This Jesus held no formal position of leadership. In fact, he died as a convicted criminal at the hands of the state.

And yet, the movement he started transformed the entire Roman Empire and inspired brave men to speak and write words such as these: “We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable right.”

Before the Jesus movement, such ideas were not self-evident to anyone, anywhere.

Similar things could be argued about modern medicine, human rights, individual liberty, the scientific method, and on and on.

Think for a moment about the fact that Jesus lived a public life at the most for 3 years, perhaps it was as brief as only one year.

Jesus never built any monuments. We think that he was a builder, but nothing tangible that his hands ever lasted.

Consider what you know of human history.

If you take a minute, I’ll bet that your memory will be filled with the names of famous people, of powerful people, wealthy people.

Kings and emperors, generals and warriors. Royal dynasties and trusted councilors.

These are the movers and shakers of the world, the names that are remembered in the history books, and they are nearly always the powerful ones.

And then there is this man, this Holy Child born to refugee parents who could not go home because of government-sponsored violence.

We need to take stock of this truth: Jesus did not make anything move or shake – except for the hearts and souls of those who came into contact with him.

Jesus did not make things happen. Things were done to him.

Here is truth: in this one person, the entire shape of human society took a new course.

No longer was the King, the Governor, the One in charge – no longer was THAT person deemed to be most important to God or the gods.

Now, because of this Holy Child of Bethlehem, we know that God is found in “the least of these” who are our human sisters and brothers.

The weak, the powerless, the poor, the children.

When people heard Jesus speak in his own day, it is reported that everyone was puzzled and amazed. “We’ve never heard anyone speak like this!” they said. And yet now, every single day, there are countless millions around the world who continue to be awed and amazed by his words as shared and reported among his friends.

What child is this, who laid to rest, on Mary’s lap, is sleeping?

This is the question that will continue to be asked.

It is said that Jesus himself asked those around him, “Who do you say that I am?”

THIS is your question tonight! How will you answer it?

What holy child IS this, whose birth we rejoice in this night?

My friends: you live in a world that has been shaped in every conceivable way by his life, by his teaching, by his death, and by his ongoing life! How then will you welcome the presence of Jesus into your life this Christmas and throughout the New Year?

So as you reach into stockings and open presents and eat pie and watch the twinkling lights of the Christmas tree, may you have the gift to remember this Holy Child – vulnerable, weak, helpless – who lived a real human life, and who turned the entire world upside down!

And may you have the gift to welcome his presence – his transformational presence - into your real, everyday life today and always. Amen.

CHRISTMAS DAY MEDITATION

Merry Christmas, my friends! This is a day for rejoicing.

But it is more than just a single day, isn't it?

It has often been said that Christmas should last all year long.

That's a tall order, perhaps even impossible to make happen, but the idea is right on the mark.

Because what this day is truly about is the act of becoming. It's about change.

In the words of theology, this day is all about Incarnation.

Incarnation comes from Latin meaning "in the flesh."

In the flesh. God becoming real in the lives of ordinary human beings.

THAT is what we celebrate, and THAT is what we long for!

Think for a moment about your dreams and desires:

what is it that you long for most deeply?

Imagine yourself in the shoes of a child whose father has been deployed by the Marines numerous times over the last few years, and now her father is away over Christmas.

More than anything else, the child wants her father to be there, to be home.

She sits and looks at a photo of him and says, "I wish that I could touch him, that he could step right out of the picture and into my room."

Well, what if that dream became a reality? Hard to believe, right?

That's what Christmas is about: God becoming real. Real human. Real flesh and blood. God becoming intimately involved in the details of life – the details of your life, and of every life – without exception.

The late philosopher Dallas Willard once said that “Prayer to the living and personal God of the universe is intelligent conversation about matters of mutual concern.”

Prayer is intelligent conversation about matters of mutual concern.

You see, our real human life is now a matter of mutual concern, because God has made a choice to get involved. To have skin in the game.

And never again will God be distant, detached, separate or unaware.

And so, my friends, on this blessed day, let yourself be carried away by the mystery and majesty of God’s love for the world, God’s engagement in our lives.

These are tidings of great joy for all the people.

And joy is not something that you can analyze or define. Joy washes over you. You become engulfed in joy. You enter into joy.

And that is why we are here today: together, to enter more deeply into the joy of the Word made flesh and dwelling among us – even here and now.

And so we stand together now and with one voice, we proclaim the enduring faith of the Church in the words of the Nicene Creed.