

christmas is for children

a sermon preached on the

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st john's

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the lections: Isaiah 61: 10 – 62:3; Psalm 148; Galatians 4: 4-7; Luke 2: 15-21

In the communities we live and work in most of us would have heard as we approached Christmas that, 'Christmas is really only for children'. It is the time of the year when adults work overtime to orchestrate and atmosphere of suspense and expectation, with ritual countdowns, props and performances; trees felled and hauled inside covered with glass balls, tinsel and lights instead of bird's nests and pine cones. Carols and the excerpts from the Messiah re-played on the radio throughout the days before Christmas. Timing is essential, with tension mounting all through December, building up to the big day, mysterious and magical, climaxing with the wonder of Christmas morning-gifts, both long desired and surprising, piled high with extravagant abundance under the tree.

Certainly, the scriptures tell the Christmas story of the birth of a child, the God-child, the Word made flesh come to share our life. Even in the most hardened characters pausing and paying attention, the birth of a child can stir wonder in the hearts of most people. Despite detailed lessons in reproductive biology and explicit sex education, new life suddenly seems mysterious, even miraculous. However much experience and social psychology convince us that this child will likely grow up to be very much like us, a mixture of virtue and vice, failure and accomplishment, at least by middle age a person of adjusted expectations and tarnished ideals.

Still, face to face with an infant, helpless and tiny, we let go, suspend judgement. We feel hope surge at the real presence of a new human being, unspoiled and full of possibility. Why, this child could be, the world in which this child grows up to adulthood might be radically different, even a so much better place, a place where there is no sorrow or crying, where justice rolls down like water, righteousness like an ever flowing stream.

All four gospel accounts are about God's new beginning, about God's coming among the people of God to launch a new start. Luke tells us about the Kingdom of God in its infancy and childhood, about its heralding by John the Baptist, about its birthing in Jesus' ministry, about its proclamation in all the towns and villages, about how the Word of God grew and multiplied, from Jerusalem through Judea and Samaria to the ends of the earth. Luke recounts how the Kingdom of God breaks through with startling signs and wonders, because of this, to become part of it, we have to enter it as a little child.

While saying this it is also important to note that in Luke's gospel, there is nothing childish about Kingdom coming. A thousand years before, David's dynasty came with force and violence, the monarchy consolidated only after years of guerrilla warfare. Likewise, the Kingdom of God arrives with force and violence, because it means revolutionary upheaval, root and branch social reorganisation. More than the other Gospels, Luke emphasises the big role reverses we hear in Mary's song; rich and poor, powerful and oppressed, complacent and miserable, have's and have-not's, will change places. Debt moratorium will be enforced; material wealth, fields and houses will be redistributed. Social outcasts will take places of honour, while old-world 'movers and shakers' find themselves suddenly disreputable, down and out.

The people who have a big stake in the way things are will find it hard to welcome the coming Kingdom of God. Like the rich young ruler, we could fear that we have too much to lose. Luke's gospel records how some 'turn away sadly', while others are affronted, and respond to Jesus' prophetic thrust with mounting hostility. Jesus goes to the cross, because both wings of religious establishment find him too dangerous. Sadducees see national identity and survival as orbiting around the temple cult. They do not appreciate Jesus' forecast that the temple will soon be destroyed. Pharisees are convinced that God will send Messiah if and only if remnant Israel observes the Torah's commandments meticulously. Jesus comes along and devalues their currency, when he declares that entry into Kingdom coming depends not on moral achievement, but on turning again, on repentance and the forgiveness of sins.

Yes, Kingdom-coming is bad news for those who are deeply invested in the old world order. But it is good news, for babies, for infants and children, who trust God's Wisdom and Goodness, who open themselves to be taught and formed by God's vision and plans. We wonder at newborns, because they symbolise new beginnings, as yet-unspoiled humanity. We wonder at the Annunciation to Mary, virgin daughter of Zion, whose 'yes' to Gabriel personifies Israel's fresh start. Luke's Gospel wows us with a greater kingdom wonder; none of us are too used up, too spoiled or twisted to have an honoured place at the Messiah's table, to make a Kingdom contribution. Each of us is fresh start material in God's re-creative hands.

Luke begins with Zechariah and Elizabeth, faithful but weighed down by world-weariness that snuffs out hope. Zechariah's heart is Godward, but his spiritual senses are dulled by disappointment. 'This old world draws on towards night'. Nine months' gestation stirs Zechariah up to wonder, loosens his tongue with ecstatic utterance. 'The child's name is "John"'. He will prepare the Messiah's way!' 'Blessed be the Lord God of Israel' who makes the barren fruitful after it is already too late!

Shepherds in the field, homeless, marginalised and disreputable, are open and receptive, astonished to hear, ready to believe, eager to act on what the angels say. Honoured by their audience with angels, the shepherds worship at the manger. Disqualified as witnesses in human courtrooms, they become the first missionaries, testifying to all and sundry and glorifying God.

Harlots, locked in sexual slavery, scorned by the society that feels entitled to use them, eagerly turn again, captives released by Jesus' beck and call. Tax collectors knew well how to exploit Roman rule for profit. But Zacchaeus climbs a tree like a school boy, the better to see Jesus, refunds fourfold everything he defrauded, because – wonder of wonders – Jesus invites himself over to be a guest in his house.

Yes, the real Christmas is for children, not only for the young ones whose lives are mostly ahead of them, but also for adults who need to be rebirthed as children. The real Christmas comes for all of us, mysterious and miraculous, bringing gifts both long desired and surprising, piled high with extravagant abundance. The Kingdom of God is in our midst. We only have to let go enough to allow wonder to be reborn!!