

## **WHAT CHILD IS THIS?**



**Scripture:**

**Isaiah 9:2-7**

<sup>2</sup>The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness—on them light has shined. <sup>3</sup>You have multiplied the nation, you have increased its joy; they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as people exult when dividing plunder. <sup>4</sup>For the yoke of their burden, and the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian. <sup>5</sup>For all the boots of the tramping warriors and all the garments rolled in blood shall be burned as fuel for the fire. <sup>6</sup>For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. <sup>7</sup>His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom. He will establish and uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time onward and forevermore. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this.

**John 1:1-14**

<sup>1</sup>In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. <sup>2</sup>He was in the beginning with God. <sup>3</sup>All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being <sup>4</sup>in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. <sup>5</sup>The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

<sup>6</sup>There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. <sup>7</sup>He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. <sup>8</sup>He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. <sup>9</sup>The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

<sup>10</sup>He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. <sup>11</sup>He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. <sup>12</sup>But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, <sup>13</sup>who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

<sup>14</sup>And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

**This is the Word of the Lord! Thanks be to God!**



### **WHAT CHILD IS THIS?**

Maybe it is because I was first trained as a psychiatric nurse therapist, but I am truly fascinated about God coming to us in the

body of a baby! God incarnate, God in the flesh, is absolutely amazing!

This huge event is described only in the book of Matthew briefly and more

extensively in the book of Luke. Yet the birth of Christ inspired Christ Mass. Yes, it used to just be a mass, a worship service commemorating the birth of Christ. Christ – mass has become Christmas, which two-thousand years later seems to take over the world every October through December and then into January with after-Christmas sales.

### **HOW DID THE CELEBRATION CHANGE?**

How did things evolve from a holy worship service one evening and one morning a year to a global shopping season?

Lucy van Pelt once explained her perspective in *A Charlie Brown Christmas*. She said, “Look, Charlie, let’s face it, we all know that Christmas is a big commercial racket. It’s run by a big eastern syndicate, you know.”

She was basically right. Back in the 1800’s Christmas was celebrated with a worship service and a feast similar to Thanksgiving. An article on Bloomberg.com titled *How Christmas Became the Most Commercialized Holiday*, says that it was the urban upper class homes that created the holiday traditions of decorating and extensive gift giving.

In 1823, the story, *A Visit from St. Nicholas*, also known as *The Night before Christmas*, became popular and it had a big influence on the American tradition of celebrating Christmas in private homes rather than in churches. Around the same time, *Harper’s Weekly Magazine* began to print articles about how to celebrate the perfect Christmas with special treats, decorations, and etiquette for Christmas dinner at home.

The Woolworth Stores in the 1870’s were the first to promote Christmas decorations and specialized Christmas gifts. So all of the commercialization of Christmas has developed just in the last one-hundred-fifty years.

Now our economy depends on Christmas sales so marketing strategies are moving the Christmas season into September hoping the sooner people start buying for Christmas the

more they will buy. But there is a new trend they spoke about on TV last week. The trend is to stop buying gifts for each other to decrease the stress of the season and just enjoy being with family, like we do at Thanksgiving.

Wouldn’t it be wonderful if that would keep trending and we’d see the pendulum swing back to the early 1800’s when Christmas was about being with family and worshipping the real reason for the season? Let’s keep this trend going! But the kids here are silently screaming, “NOOOOO!”

### **THE WORD BECAME FLESH**

The text for today came from John 1 where the birth story is summed up by saying: The Word became Flesh and dwelled among us.” Rather than detailing the birth as it is in Matthew and Luke, John focuses on Jesus being with God since the beginning of everything. And that Jesus is life and the light of all people known to us from what is revealed about him in THE WORD, God’s message to us in the scriptures.

**“In the beginning the Word was with God and the Word was God” can be translated:  
In the beginning was the gift and the gift was with God and the Gift was God.  
And we should add, and it was surrounded by pain and light.**

### **THE LIGHT FROM THE STAR**

The light shining from the star is an important part of the birth story of Jesus. The wise men followed the light to find the Christ child. We will be celebrating that event called Epiphany on January 6<sup>th</sup> in our Friday evening Vespers service. Don’t miss it! We have some new musicians joining us!

Over the years I have analyzed this Christmas birth event from all different

angles. Here are a couple of angles to consider.

### **LET US PONDER**

First, like Mary who pondered all the events around Christ's birth in her heart, ponder for awhile yourself how wise God must be to come to us as a baby! This gave us a perfectly clear message that humbleness is the key to leadership, not fame or fortune but humility is true power. You can't get much more humble than a baby born to a poor teenage mother in a lowly manger because there was no room for them in the inn. Ponder how fragile and precious a baby is and how God must have wanted us to appreciate each baby born on this earth by coming to us as an infant.

As a flesh and blood human baby, God chose to come to earth to demonstrate God's sacrificial love for each one of us and to show us how to deeply love one another. This is what we are celebrating today!

German theologian and Hitler opponent, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in his book: *God in the Manger* said, When God's Son took on flesh, he truly and bodily took on, out of pure grace, our being, our nature, ourselves... Now we are in him. Where he is, there we are, too, in the incarnation, on the cross, and in his resurrection. We belong to Jesus because we are in Jesus. That is why the Scriptures call us the Body of Christ.

If God had come to us as a burning bush again or as a spirit in a cloud going before us, as God once did according to the Old Testament, we would not have felt as if we could relate to the Divine as we can to a person who walked on this earth like one of us. It is so much easier to relate to someone who experienced all of what we went through starting out as a helpless child.

### **BORN DURING CAESAR'S RUTHLESS REIGN**

Second, it is significant that his birth happened in the midst of the reign of Caesar, who even now is an example for terrible

tyrants everywhere. Even in deep darkness, there is light at work in the world. Nations may rise and fall, politicians rant and rave, economies wax and wane, but where would we be if Jesus had not shown up?

**God's grace and love in the mysterious light of Christ's birth cannot be bought by the rich or withheld from the homeless, is not dependent on whether you are naughty or nice. It is not just for Christians, but is equally shining for Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Jews, and people of no faith at all.**

Corporations can't buy it, market it, or exploit it. It does not set limits. God's love is the hinge on which the world relies. And this magnificent free gift, which Christmas commemorates, is graciously given in love by God to the world whether it is accepted or not.

Jesus' light first shone in the midst of poverty during the darkness of Caesar's ruthless reign and it still shines today because two-thousand years ago the darkness could not overcome it. Not even the darkness of the killing of innocents.

Matthew 2:16 tells the story of Herod killing all the infants two years of age and younger in and around Bethlehem in an effort to eliminate Jesus.

Stanley Hauerwas said, "Perhaps no event in the gospel more determinatively challenges the sentimental depiction of Christmas than the death of these children. Jesus is born into a world in which children are killed, and continue to be killed all around this world."

In this era when innocents are being slaughtered in Berlin, and Nice, and especially in Aleppo, Syria, we must remember that Jesus was born into such a time and place. Jesus understands the

tragedies that are happening today because they were happening then during his era.

Yet, the refugee crisis and the killing of over fifty-thousand children so far in Aleppo are on a much bigger scale than the killing of innocents in Herod's day. Like the Magi who disobeyed their ruler Herod to keep Jesus safe, we are called to do what we can to stop the modern day Herods from abusing and denying rights to the most vulnerable in our country. This is why God came to us as a child. We are to protect the children, like Mary and Joseph, who escaped the Romans and fled to Egypt to protect Jesus. There they found refuge and safety.

### **ALL THE WORLD'S CHILDREN**

Like our role models in the faith, we must find ways to provide refuge and safety for the children caught up in violence wherever it is happening. For their safety is our safety. When we sustain children around the world the sustenance and global security positively affects all of us as well.

(My daughter, Kathryn just finished a thirty page paper on this for Duke Law School.) The United Nations agrees that the future hope for our world is protecting and providing for the safety, healthcare, and educational needs of all the world's children now.

Jesus doesn't expect us to just stand idly by and let the slaughters and other violence happen. We are called to be God's hands and feet and heart and do something even if we are only able to pray for them; prayer is eternally powerful. We are called to make a difference in the life of a child in some tangible way. And in so doing for the children who are the most vulnerable of the least of these, we are caring for Jesus, as the Christ child.

I will close with a poem by Ann Weems who is a beloved poet and the spouse of a Presbyterian minister. She lost a son to murder the day after his twenty-first birthday. Her words are worth noting about celebrating

this Christmas in an imperfect world. It is titled:

### **NOT CELEBRATE?**

**Your burden is too great to bear?  
Your Loneliness is intensified during  
this Christmas Season?  
Your tears have no end?  
Not celebrate?**

**You should lead the celebration!  
You should run through the streets to  
ring the bells and sing the loudest!  
You should fling the tinsel on the tree,  
Open your house to your neighbors,  
and call them in to dance!  
For it is you above all others  
who know the joy of Advent.  
It is unto you that a Savior  
is born this day,  
One who comes to lift your burden  
from your shoulders,  
One who comes to wipe the tears  
from your eyes.  
You are not alone,  
For He is born this day to YOU!**

### **Benediction:**

**Let us never forget that the best  
gifts can't be bought in a store.**

**The grace of our Lord, Jesus  
Christ, the Love of God, and the  
fellowship of the Holy Spirit is freely  
given to you this day and every day of  
your life. Cherish them and be at peace.  
Merry Christmas! Amen**



**Rev. Dr. Cindy Alloway  
Presbyterian Church of the Roses  
2500 Patio Court  
Santa Rosa, CA 95405**