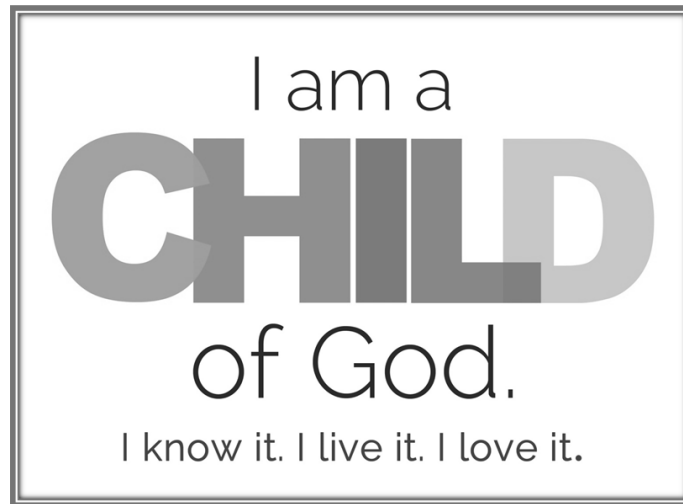


GOD'S CHILDREN



Scripture:

Jeremiah 31:7-14

⁷For thus says the LORD: Sing aloud with gladness for Jacob, and raise shouts for the chief of the nations; proclaim, give praise, and say, "Save, O LORD, your people, the remnant of Israel."

⁸See, I am going to bring them from the land of the north, and gather them from the farthest parts of the earth, among them the blind and the lame, those with child and those in labor, together; a great company, they shall return here. ⁹With weeping they shall come, and with consolations I will lead them back, I will let them walk by brooks of water, in a straight path in which they shall not stumble; for I have become a father to Israel, and Ephraim is my firstborn.

¹⁰Hear the word of the LORD, O nations, and declare it in the coastlands far away; say, "He who scattered Israel will gather him, and will keep him as a shepherd a flock." ¹¹For the LORD has ransomed Jacob, and has redeemed him from hands too strong for him. ¹²They shall come and sing aloud on the height of Zion, and they shall be radiant over the goodness of the LORD, over the grain, the wine, and the oil, and over the young of the flock and the herd; their life shall become like a watered garden, and they shall never languish again. ¹³Then shall the young women rejoice in the dance, and the young men and the old shall be merry. I will turn their mourning into joy, I will comfort them, and give them gladness for sorrow. ¹⁴I will give the priests their fill of fatness, and my people shall be satisfied with my bounty, says the LORD.

John 1:10-18

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

¹⁴And 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. ¹⁵(John testified to him and cried out, "This was he of

whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me.'")¹⁶From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace.¹⁷The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.¹⁸No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.

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



GOD'S CHILDREN

The first chapter of John has been characterized as one of the greatest adventures of religious thought ever achieved by the human mind. Whether you agree with this statement or not, the first chapter of the fourth gospel is so different than its three synoptic predecessors that one instinctively knows from the very first line that we need to slow down and pay attention.

We hear this reading in the Christmas season, yet it has none of the familiar Christmas characters we build pageants, carols or stories around. Rather, John invites us to contemplate a non-sentimental Christmas that fills us with hope and joy the whole year through, once we grasp what is being said! John doesn't deal with angels or shepherds and seems to know nothing of a young mother or magi from the east. In John's poetic song story there is hardly anything about the birth of Jesus himself.

THE DIFFERENCE CHRIST'S BIRTH MAKES

Instead John chooses to focus on the difference this birth makes for all of us. We hear of Jesus as God's love song, singing life into the world's babble and chaos. Jesus is often referred to as the Word. The Word is not something written or printed but said and experienced; it is spoken from the beginning of creation and the first lines have a familiar echo back to the first lines of Genesis' creation story.

Jesus is God's eternal speech which became flesh and lived among us, coming to

be fully part of the world in which you and I live and serve. God dwells among us and empowers us to be. This embodiment matters and has changed the world forever. God's eternal expression of love was articulated with our world and within human history.

JESUS IS GOD'S SERMON TO US

Jesus is God's sermon preached to us in the living out of a human life in a particular person.

Thus Jesus is the Word of God incarnate.

**God says, 'This is who I am.'
This Word is God coming to earth as a human being to help us see, hear, touch and experience God.**

This God heals, forgives, embraces outcasts, prays for those who hurt him and understands betrayal, denial, suffering, pain, humiliation and death. This God knows we need a Savior and brings us victory over despair, defeat, destruction and death.

Jesus, as the Word, speaks God's power into our lives, power to create, power over all creation, power to restore us to what God wants us to be and gives us life everlasting.

God brings hope, joy, grace, truth, life and light to the world. As God's speech, Jesus is able to do what he wishes and what Jesus wishes to give men, women and children is the authentic, abundant life of children of God. Jesus came that we might become God's children.

BELOVED CHILDREN OF GOD

As perfectly, imperfect, beloved children of God, we are not described as God's children by our good or bad behavior, our upbringing, interests, marital status, sexuality, or past triumphs or failures. We are not described by our limitations or hurts. Our destinies are not controlled by others, overpowered or dominated by the circumstances we find ourselves in.

Rather, we are those individuals who know ourselves to be God's own beloved children.

We are defined by God calling us God's own sons and daughters, individuals who hold infinite worth in God's eyes.

We are loved unconditionally, respected and used by God to care for God's beloved creation, not to pay some obscure penalty for sin but rather remind us and even convince us that God loves us more than anything we have ever encountered before.

We are invited into God's eternal actions.

THE GIFT OF TRUE POWER

Becoming children of God isn't an initiation into a club. It's being given the power to become child-like persons with a gift of true power to be creative, authentic, life giving and joining with God's eternal work to redeem all of creation. We accept our birthright and choose to live an adventure of childlike faith.

We choose to live life with dangerous wonder. We live each day in a mix of astonishment and terror, like the shepherds did in those other Christmas stories. We approach life with amazement and fear as if

the angels were singing their Glorias to us in our own Christmas story. We live each day in risky curiosity, summoning the courage to ask the big questions as Mary did at the Annunciation, in order to struggle to find the truth we so desperately seek.

We act with wild abandon like the Magi did as they followed the star with a daily fearlessness that takes us through the unclear, frightening and rugged terrain to a place of joy, peace and abandon. We approach to kneel at the manger and each encounter in life with daring playfulness as an expression of hope filled with irony, metaphor, laughter, jest, enjoyment and surprise.

MAKE TIME TO BE QUIET

We are attentive with wide-eyed listening as we make time to be quiet each day, cherishing, appreciating, and relishing the silence and the words that come from that silence. We feel a deep irresponsible passion, an energy that takes over and motivates us with ideas and actions that resemble irresistible extravagance, risk and gratitude all rolled into one. We notice our bodies acting out without words as they are taken over by happy terror, a mix of wonder, awe, glee, fear and worship all at the same time that leaves us excited and giddy.

NAÏVE GRACE

We begin to look at life through the naïve grace that Jesus brought to situations that is ridiculously inclusive, outside the lines, indiscriminate, impractical, unrealistic, looks foolish and may be criticized or ridiculed. We approach all of life with the childlike faith Jesus called his disciples to that is simple, honest, direct, not limited by words and perhaps expresses itself best by hops, skips, jumps, winks, squeezes, tears, laughter, squeals and dancing.

GOD IS WITH US

We have been given a share in his life, light and love. We are restored by the Christmas event - God is with us Emmanuel. God choosing to put skin on, walk among us and live in our neighborhood is a pivotal point in salvation history. The Incarnation helps us to grasp who we really are.

In God we live, move and have our being. We have forgotten our divine nobility, the realm we were destined from the very beginning. Beyond our sinfulness or missing the mark, we are God's. And by believing in his name, we are able to trust God and live our lives as Christ lived his. Incarnation is an ongoing process of dying to self so that Christ can be born in us. You might say that this is the way Christians are re-incarnated!

In Christ, we recognize our own humanity and status as God's beloved children and recognize the same in others. We are reunited and reconnected to God through Christ.

What happens to you matters to me; you become significant, and together we have found favor with God and want to grow into God. The Savior of the world is one of us, human, and doesn't stand apart from us but among us. The Word is compassionate, merciful, forgiving, respects and values us and deems us worthy to be called children of God.

Do you believe this, your very own personal Christmas story?

Do you believe the differences that this birth makes that John focuses on?

Do you need help in believing it with childlike faith and dangerous wonder?

A place to begin is with this New Years practice. At least once a day look into the mirror and say, "I am God's beloved child, loved, respected in my uniqueness and God will use me to change the world."

This sounds simple enough, but is hard to say and even harder to believe. As you begin, doubts will creep in and those saboteur voices will question. You? But what about that time you failed, forgot, made a mistake or did harm to someone or something? These voices will surely grow even louder as you look in that mirror. Do not give up. This is why John's unsentimental Christmas message is so important. Jesus gives each one of us the power to become one of God's children and live that life with childlike faith.

And remember to say, "I am God's beloved child, loved, respected in my uniqueness and God will use me to change the world."



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