

What Christmas Is All About

Sermon for Christmas Eve, December 24, 2025

Readings: Isaiah 9:2-7; Titus 2:11-14; Luke 2:1-14; Psalm 9

Sermon text: But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see-- I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.

Sixty years ago Charlie Brown asked the question, "Isn't there anyone who knows what Christmas is all about?" Linus of course knew the answer. Lights please. King James version:

And there were shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid.

And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord.

And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger. And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.

That's what Christmas is all about, Charlie Brown.

Christmas is about a story. The story of the birth of a child, a savior, who is Christ the Lord. A story told throughout the ages—told in different forms, including earlier tonight at our Christmas pageant. A birth celebrated in countless ways in hundreds of cultures. The sights and sounds and tastes from childhood, including tales of a mysterious St Nick bringing gifts to children—or the three kings—of presents exchanged before a decorated tree, of lights in windows and inflatable snowmen and reindeer, all of the trappings of the season in our consumer culture (sixty years Charlie already hated the commercialization; Snoopy's doghouse gone wild).

Christmas is also about peace on earth, goodwill among people, as the angelic host proclaimed. God and humanity reconciled, people everywhere living together in harmony with nature, swords into ploughshares, love in the air, love actually. and it's a wonderful life. Candlelight services on Christmas Eve. Prayers for world peace. Urbi et orbem; in the city and throughout the world.

But the good news is a promise not a present or historical reality; a star to follow not a map with known coordinates and directions, a vision of a possible world, where peace and goodwill indeed reign. The kingdom of heaven, the reign of love, the beloved community. Not a mirage, or a pipe dream, but an ideal, a goal. On this earth, in our lives we will not reach the promised land, but we cannot abandon the long march toward it. We cannot give in to despair, cynicism, unchecked self interest. That way lies a worsening, coarsening culture, a more devastated environment, a bitter heart and a diminished future for our children. The prophets and the angels call us an enlarged imagination that opens avenues of hope and action, courage and compassion.

This is good news for all people. The philosopher Simon Critchley, describing the contours for a “faith of the faithless,” writes that “Christ is the incarnation of love as an act of imagination ... the imaginative projection of love onto all creatures.” We need to follow that star if we are truly wise, whether doctrinaire Christians or not.

Call that the political meaning of the story, an agenda for action: strive for justice and peace as Jesus taught; show mercy and forgiveness as he did.

There is also a third level of the meaning of Christmas. This is the level of theology and doctrine, the doctrine of the Incarnation.

This is an incredibly profound doctrine. John’s Prologue spelled it out clearly. Spotlight please:

In the beginning was the Word, the Logos, and the Logos was with God and was God. ...And the Word became flesh and dwelled among us, full of grace and truth.

The Logos is reason and pattern, the life and the light of the world—and this Logos became flesh, born of Mary, to be God with us, fully divine yet also fully human, to show us the way, to break down the hostility, the restore us to harmony with God, each other and creation. This restoration is even more, it is the process of new creation, of a divinized humanity and all creation. “God became human so that humanity (and all creation) might become God.”

This is not a new thought. It is a quote from St Athanasius, one of key architects of the Nicene Creed, first ratified by an ecumenical council at Nicea 1700 years ago this year.

What does it mean? Well, let's hear a more recent statement of understanding by the Jesuit priest, scientist, and mystic Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, who died in 1955, seventy years ago and whose grave is in the cemetery at what is now the Culinary Institute in Hyde Park). He wrote: "Through your own incarnation, my God, all matter is henceforth incarnate." We are all together "carried in the one world-womb; yet each of us is our own little microcosm in which the Incarnation is wrought independently with degrees of intensity, and shades that are incommunicable." (Hat tip to my friend and colleague Masud ibn Seydullah for sending this.)

Think about yourself as your own little microcosm in which the Incarnation is wrought as you approach the altar of the sacramental presence of Christ, as you sing Silent Night in candlelight. Go into the world following the service with fresh eyes, seeing that, as the Greek philosopher Thales put it, "All things are full of gods." All creation is in the process of divinization—of becoming new creation—including you and me and my dog Zoe.

Perhaps you don't even need to be an orthodox Christian to believe this (though it helps!). Ed Simon, writing recently in the Times offers a similar take on the meaning of Christmas, using a William Blake depiction of the birth of Jesus—sort of floating in air, arms outstretched above a weary Mary. He writes, "One need not be a conventional Christian — I'm not — to see the significance of the nativity story. Because what the nativity story conveys is a narrative of wonder threaded through prosaic reality, where the birth of a child is an act of God's self-creation, where a manger can be the site of the universe's new genesis. Perhaps Blake's seeing angels in trees and God in his kitchen is the true nature of things, and everyday appearances are the real delusions."

To see Jesus, the Incarnation of God, the Word made flesh, in light, shadow, joy and sorrow, in the things of the world and the dreams of heaven, in the hands and hearts and faces of those you meet—this is what Christmas is all about, Charlie Brown.

Thank you God for coming among us, thank you for filling the universe with your presence, thank you for calling us a world of peace and justice, thank you for giving joy to the world, for the music and dance of life, for the birth of a child, your Son our Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

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