

Baby Jesus is Alive!

Christmas Eve – Luke 2:1-20

preached by the Rector at St. Paul's, Henderson Christmas Eve, 2012

Lord, take my eyes and see through them. Take my lips and speak through them. Take my soul and set it on fire with love for thee. Amen.

Merry Christmas! [I said, Merry Christmas!] There you go.

I can't help it. I love Christmas. All the whole season of Advent I wait and watch, just like a good little Anglican. I preach about John the Baptist and preparing the way and about the coming of Christ again in glory. I try really hard not to get ahead of myself. And, as you know, I try to persuade *you* not to get ahead of *yourselves* either. But I've got to tell you, it's hard. What with the Christmas music playing at all the places I go to shop, (I gripe from up here, but I hum along to Silent Night, even if it is at the Wal-Mart) and what with all the Christmas specials on the TV, (I complain, but I have my favorites) and what with the wonderful presents and beautiful cards arriving day by day, it's hard *not* to get into the Christmas spirit a bit early.

My final tumble came just last week when Michelle Green and I went in search of all the things needful for the Epiphany Pageant which, after a year absence, we'll be bringing together, God willing, for the 10:00 service on Sunday morning, January 6. (That's a plug, in case you were wondering.) We were quite sure that all the costumes and such had been stowed away after the *last* Pageant. But with all the heating and air-conditioning work and such, we were less than fully sure *where* they had been stowed. What's more, and perhaps worse, though it is not a particularly complex production, nobody we talked to knew whether a copy of the script even *existed*. Having vainly looked in a couple of other likely spots, we discovered the well-labeled treasure bins on the shelf above the acolyte robes, and pulled them down to take a look. We found a couple copies of the script – thanks be to God – along with garland angel halos, and shepherds' staffs, and kings' crowns, and lambs' ears, and clean straw to fill the Lord of Heaven's cradle.

All this launched me over the candlestick and into the Christmas spirit because I remembered again a story told by my mom, since I was too young to remember it myself, about the pageant the year my next-to-the-youngest brother, David, was born. That year I was five, David, whose birthday is December 7th, was *brand new*, and my Daddy was the pastor of the Greenville, Ohio United Missionary Church. Our little Sunday School had prepared for weeks and weeks for the Pageant. We all had our costumes, put together from bathrobes and towels and left over material from our mothers' sewing baskets. We had all memorized our little parts. In that rural community, we even had a *real* lamb, just for authenticity.

I don't know what my role was. At five, I know I wouldn't have been Joseph, he was usually played by one of the older boys. Maybe it was Johnny Deeter or Tommy Hicks, who would have been more like eight that year, I think. Anyway, I'm sure I *had* a part – after all, I *was* the preacher's kid. But *everybody* had a part, even if it was only to help sing, "Glory to God in the highest!" The biggest part, as it turned out however, was played by my baby brother.

The dress rehearsal had gone pretty well. A few robes and headdresses needed trimming or tucking or pinning. A couple of the younger participants needed a bit of coaching on their lines. The lamb made a bit of a mess – to the chagrin of my Dad and Juanita Cole, the Sunday School Superintendent, but to the giggling delight of the rest of us. And a bit more hay was needed for the manger. Jesus, who was being played by a little plastic doll donated, though not without objection, by my sister, Becky, kept disappearing from sight altogether when he was laid in the manger, wrapped in swaddling clothes that looked suspiciously like one of the baby blankets from *our* house.

At last the big night came, but my mom had a surprise. She had wrapped my three-week-old brother up in the ersatz swaddling clothes and had given our Mary, probably one of the Pressman girls, instructions about the difference between carrying a plastic baby and a carrying real one. As the narration began and the Holy Family made their entrance, the congregation noticed the addition and was *delighted*, letting out the predictable "oohs" and "aahs" and "how cutes." Mary and Joseph took their stations on the

right side of the platform in the makeshift stable along with the paper-mâché ox and ass, and they laid David, I mean Jesus, in the newly well-filled manger.

Meanwhile, on the left side of the platform there were shepherds abiding with their flocks by night, including one authentic, and so far well-behaved, lamb. And lo, the Angel of the Lord came upon them and they were sore afraid. “Fear not!” the angel spoke her good tidings of great joy – at the top of her little lungs. Then suddenly, or as soon as Ms Cole could get them lined up, there was *with* the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, (at least five), praising God and singing, “Joy to the world, the Lord is come!” Then the angel sent the shepherds to Bethlehem, at the other end of the platform, to *see* this great thing which had been made known to them.

The shepherds tromped across the front of the church with staffs in hand and the authentic lamb in tow. When they got there, they gathered around Mary, Joseph and the manger, and knelt in quiet devotion.

All of a sudden, one of the younger shepherds, a little fella’ of three or four, irreverently jumped back to his feet, looked to his parents in the congregation, and pointing at the manger exclaimed, “Hey! He’s alive! Baby Jesus is alive!”

One of the reasons that the church year asks us to slow down, to spend a little time thinking about the expectancy of Advent, to delay the onslaught of the Christmas spirit, is that once we have gotten into our joyous celebration of the Feast of Christ’s birth, we have a persistent tendency to keep it that way. Once we have our tableau of the Holy Family and the shepherds and the angels and the kings all set up, we want to just gaze at it, to “ooh,” and to “aah,” and to “how cute.” Once we have our Baby Jesus in the manger, we want to leave him there. Once we have things all cozy, comfy and hot-chocolate-warm-in-our-tummies pleasant, we want things to stay the way they are.

The problem is, Christmas is most definitely *not* about leaving things the way they are. The One who became incarnate of the Virgin Mary by the power of the Holy Spirit and became man, may have come as a babe in a manger. But he most definitely did *not* leave it at that. That isn’t some plastic baby doll Jesus in the Bethlehem stable, dear friends. That’s the eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten not made, only Son of God. And he’s *alive!* Baby Jesus is alive! And he’s come to make a claim on who we are and what we do and how we live our lives.

You see, if you never let the Christ Child step out of the manger of the children’s pageant to be born anew in your very heart, the Incarnation will be nothing more than a quaint and charming story. But if we allow the Good News that, “God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son” become more than just a memory verse, more than just a slogan on a T-shirt, more than just a sign to hold up in the end-zone, if we allow that message to touch who we *are*, *then* we have the true spirit of Christmas, the Spirit that changed everything two thousand years ago, and changes everything still.

May the Christ of Christmas be born in us anew this glorious night. And may he give us light and life and power to fill the whole world with *his* love and *his* mercy and *his* grace – *this* glorious night... and *every* night of your life. Merry Christmas!