

December 24, 2013 (Christmas Eve – 11:00 pm)

TEXT: Luke 2:8-20

TITLE: The Importance of a Child

Welcome to church this evening. We're going to talk about the meaning of Christmas. How should we go about this? Commonly, the first step is to untangle Christmas from Santa Claus and reconnect it to Jesus. So we pile up in the middle of the table things like Jolly Ol' St. Nick, Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer, Frosty the Snowman, and Jingle Bells. We heap up the wrapping and packaging, commercialism and capitalism, the Jar Jingers and Flu Floopers, Gar Ginkers and Trum Tupers, and then sweep the whole mess onto the floor. At that point we clear our throat and announce somewhat piously, "Jesus is the reason for the season." We love how the phrase rhymes and fits so neatly on bumper stickers. Then onto our table we now pile up nativity sets, Christmas cards, carols and candles and Linus's speech from the end of a Charlie Brown Christmas. We tell of pageants of kids as shepherds in bathrobes or as wise guys from the East announcing (to everyone's delight), "We've come bearing gifts of gold, common sense, and fur." Too often we sentimentalize the story of Jesus until sadly it is as commercialized as all those other things we already swept to the floor. There has to be a better way to think about Christmas.

P.D. James is a wonderful science fiction writer, because she is not afraid to explore important ideas and imagine "what if" future scenarios. In one of her novels, The Children of Men, James describes a shocking experience in which it had become clear that all of humanity was infertile. There have been no new births anywhere on Earth for 25 years. Thus all of civilization looked around and sadly accepted the imminent disappearance of the entire human race. If that scenario was true, how do you think people would react?

Even though every individual life must come to an end - all of us eventually die - that doesn't stop us from working for good during the years we're granted here on earth. That doesn't stop us from trying to improve ourselves and care for the world around us, even if we know we will not see the final fruits of our labors. We are all like elderly gardeners, planting apple trees that won't produce crops until after we're dead and gone, but we plant them joyfully nonetheless. Much of what we do in this life is built upon the assumption that children, grandchildren and other generations will follow us and continue our work after we're gone.

But if you remove that belief – if no new generation will ever walk the paths of life we've trod – then all of our values and dreams begin to melt away. Why should a composer write music or a novelist write books if no one will be left to hear or read them? Why should an architect build cathedrals to last or engineers make sure bridges are sturdy enough for future generations if there are no future generations? Why should activists work to reform our political system or scientists try to cure diseases when the final curtain for all life will soon descend upon the global stage?

We know that there are many serious threats to humanity's survival, both natural and human-made. The global climate is changing and becoming more volatile; germs and antibiotic-resistant illnesses are spreading; nuclear arsenals continue to be unstable pawns in global war games we insist on playing. The fate of future generations does depend heavily on the decisions we make today, and we are obligated not to hand down to our children a world that is "damaged goods" unable to sustain or properly support them. Yes, our descendants' well-being is dependent on us. But we also depend on them and their existence if we wish to lead productive, meaningful lives now.

Now bring God into this conversation. Ask yourself again, what is the meaning of Christmas? God created and sustains this world. Yet through chance and false choices, sin and circumstance, the world does not reflect the fullness of God's love, mercy and justice. So what should God do about this? Destroy it and start over? No. The rainbow and the promise spoken after the flood reassure us that never again will God destroy all life. Should God turn God's back on us and walk away? No. Like a loving mother, God cannot abandon her children, ever.

God wants to come to us in a way that embodies hope, peace and joy. God could come as a warrior-king who compels us to destroy our drones and nuclear arsenals and study war no more, but no king lasts long on earth's thrones. God could emerge as a wise philosopher or a pious saint, whose wisdom and loving example inspire all humanity. But we've had our Socrates and Platos, Mahatma Gandhis and Mother Teresas, yet we still live foolishly and act hatefully toward one another.

So God came to us as a child. A vulnerable child that pulls us out of our selfish preoccupations, that forces us to drop whatever wealth or weapon we clutch in our hands, so that we can hold in our arms something wonderful – a newborn child. A living being that we can freely love. And most importantly, a child that incarnates the reassurance that life will not end with us. That we have a future – and thus a purpose and real potential – so today truly means something.

The glory of God, the eternal covenant of love and peace and joy, came to us precisely in this lowly, helpless child. Jesus' birth was never meant to overwhelm us or fascinate us. It was certainly never meant to be lost amid the sentimentality and sensory-overloads of modern Christmas spectacles. It is a shiver that runs down our spine – the quick gasp of air we take in surprise – the weight of glory that hits us square in the chest as we realize we've been handed a child in swaddling clothes. And in that child's face we see at last why we are alive now and what we must do for tomorrow and all the tomorrow's yet to come.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer once said, "We are indifferent to the [Christmas] message, taking only the pleasant and agreeable out of it and forgetting the serious aspect, that the God of the world draws near to the people of our little earth and lays claim to us." In that lowly child, God lays claim to us – places in our hands the

obligation to care for the world now and world to come. That child's face is glimpsed in every newborn child's face the world over. But the wonder of this season is that, like new parents in every land and every place, we feel overwhelmed by this gift and responsibility. But we take a deep breath and dig down deep ourselves and do whatever we must to care for this child. In that moment we are truly alive, knowing what we must do today for the sake of tomorrow. And believe that with God all things are possible. And that, my friends, most of the meaning of Christmas.