

Christmas Day, 2019 – The Rev. Gary Lawler, Church of the Ascension

“And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.”

In Nomine+

For all serious Christians, those are the true and crucial words for Christmas! Merry Christmas, Happy Holidays, Happy Yuletide, etc. may be useful in conveying the feeling or the joy implicit in the season. But, “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us,” imbues this holy day with the kind of *gravitas* that requires thoughtful examination and some prayerful pondering.

For many years, I’ve been accustomed to beginning the Christmas Day homily with an invitation to purify our minds from the angels, shepherds, wise men and baby in a manger; to purge our consciences of the trees and tinsel; the presents and portents of visiting kin; of carols and holiday cards, of sleigh bells ringing and drummer boys drumming, with the purpose of bringing into concise focus the miracle of the Incarnation of God! I repeat, The Incarnation of God!!

Theologically, it’s a really big deal and much of my concern has always been that all the distractions that the season affords would mask the out-sized importance of this miracle of love.... revealed. To be quite frank, I think that, for many, it not only masks it, but obliterates it completely. The frenzy and concentration required merely to be a participant in the full expression of the holiday season these days could easily over-power any and all pious, grace-filled moments that might occur. The problem is: How we celebrate Christmas almost completely obscures WHY we celebrate Christmas. A child who is God’s own Son was born in a manger in Bethlehem, and it is still great news, the only news about Christmas, this year or any other, that really matters.

But, this year, for some reason, I can’t seem to take my eyes off that baby. I am transfixed by the power manifested in the ordinariness of its quiet assumption of the human condition. It’s a look I think we all can recognize. It’s a similar look to what new parents display as they stare and try to comprehend who this stranger that has come into their lives is doing here and what it means to their future; a similar look to what adoring grandparents, aunts and uncles have as they project their hopes and prayers onto the new life before them; a similar look to what even strangers have as they marvel at the smallness and helplessness of a new born suddenly placed before them. I recognize all those feelings and feel them contending for primacy in me as I look into the manger in Bethlehem on this Christmas Day, 2019.

Yet, to a disturbing degree, what I experience is not post-birth awe for the arrival of an ordinary, much anticipated child, but a full and comprehensive understanding of what this child’s life holds for him; how it will impact the people around him and the very world he has come to transform. I gaze at this new born and find that I know from whence he came, his purpose, the trajectory his life will take, his joys and challenges and, yes, most cruelly, even his eventual demise and ultimately the incomparable, eternal legacy of salvation he will leave behind him. And all that weighs profoundly on the elation I might otherwise feel. Joy and sorrow do not blend well, and experienced together result in neither.

So, let’s put off the sorrow for a later time. There will be an appropriate season for that, and let’s concentrate on the joy that belongs to Christmas. For now we have a new and very special life to

celebrate. So, bring on the carols, the tinsel, the bells. Let the feasting and fun be unrestrained. For the hope of our redemption has arrived and Peace on Earth good will toward all has been declared. It is not a time for sadness even if, ultimately, that is unavoidable and inevitable. The Lord reigns from above, and has shown his all-abiding love to a world that cannot possibly comprehend or reciprocate it. He has done it, nevertheless. He has placed himself, trustingly and completely in our care. The weight of that responsibility is itself daunting.

For, we find ourselves suddenly, awkwardly placed in a role akin to that of new parents left wondering how we shall ever manage so great a responsibility as the care and nurturing of this child. "Let every heart prepare him room," the hymn says. But we look around and find that, in all likelihood, the room we have prepared is not nearly large enough or prepared well enough to provide adequately for this blessed event. With trepidation we ask ourselves: If we allow this miracle to lodge and prosper in our very hearts where will it all lead? Won't we also be obliged to actively participate in his growth and his development, feel his joy and pain, experience his suffering and passion? Won't we soon find ourselves participants of his resurrection and enthronement?

And the answer is yes! That is the promise and THE POINT! This year and every year, before the new year begins, we are given this opportunity to take on the adoption of this child, to take him into our hearts while he is yet so small and helpless that we may hardly notice the displacement it creates, and then to dedicate our lives to seeking to provide and vouchsafe a protective milieu in which he can grow and thrive in fulfillment of his manifest destiny while simultaneously and inevitably we allow him to modify, sanctify and glorify each of our own destinies. That is what the Christian life is, pure and simple. Let Christ in! Let the changes begin!

Will we know failure and disappointment? Yes! Will there be times when we are not sure we are up to the task? Yes! Will our hearts feel elation and know grief? Yes! In the end, will we think it was worth it? You bet we will! "To all those who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God," that is, the power to become like him, a true and obedient child of God.

In this child, we will have received the greatest gift of all, the beginning of the very deification process which salvation promises to all who wholeheartedly receive him. He is the very word of God, incorporated in our hearts, for all time, and he brings with him the power to inherit eternal life through him.

There is no better gift! There is no finer destiny! There is no greater reward!

Merry Christmas!

Amen.