

Sermon 1622

John 1.10-13

December 25, 2017

Christmas is about a baby who makes a family. Christmas is about birth, the new life that came into our world. It is a special life, a unique life, John's Gospel tells us. The Word, God from all eternity, became flesh and lived among us. God's one and only Son was sent down to earth as the biggest proof of God's love and commitment to the human race, to you, to me.

Then the ironies start. He made everything, but the darkness which exists cannot understand him, cannot overcome him, cannot "catch on" to him or "catch" him to bring him down. Beyond stopping and beyond understanding. That's the world's reaction.

His own did not receive him. This is not a story where the angels sing and the shepherds rush to Bethlehem. This is not a story where Wise Men from the east come to worship the baby Jesus and give him princely gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. This is a birth of contradictions, a birth of mystery. John opens the baby Jesus' birth at Christmas up when he includes you and me in the Christmas story. We are

Born of God

1. We believed in Jesus (10-12).
2. We are rightful Children of God (12-13).

"He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who received him, to those who have believed in his name (10-12),"

How could the world recognize the baby Jesus? I don't think we'd expect the hills to bow down to him or the trees to clap their hands. Even though *Joy to the World* says, "and heaven and nature sing," that's just picture language. And besides, we don't get our theology from hymns. No, the world John is talking about here is not the world of nature, the world of inanimate objects like sticks and stone, or the menagerie of life God created on day six, lions and lambs, tigers and turtles. The world John is talking about is the world of people, mankind. Mankind did not think much about Jesus, if we thought about him at all. The shepherds, yes, the shepherds went to the manger to worship the baby Jesus, but everybody they talked to on their long way back to their flocks, it seems they were content to simply be amazed at the news the shepherds brought, like a guy sitting down to the morning paper and thinking, "Huh! Train derailed going 80 on a 30 mph section of track. That's weird. Oh, look, here's the score from last night's hockey game."

Later in life this indifference would show all the more. Most people were not out to kill Jesus. Yes, his hometown people were, but that was just one day after his first sermon in Nazareth's synagogue. Yes, people said Herod was out for his head, but maybe they were bluffing. Yes, the religious leaders were determined to kill Jesus and finally succeeded. No, the Romans weren't so hot to the idea. Most of

them couldn't even spell his name right. Most people were not out to kill Jesus, but they just didn't care. At worst, Jesus was an irritation, like a video musical musician leading a camel across the lanes in a bowling alley! "Hey, head case! I'm trying to bowl here. Get your camel off my lane!" Jesus had a habit of ruining the days of those who were pretty satisfied with the self-assessments they were giving themselves.

It's like that today. Nobody has much bad to say about Jesus because most don't care that much about Jesus. He doesn't make that much of an impact on their lives. Christmas becomes such a family holiday that churches don't even bother having Christmas Day worship services or a candlelight service Christmas Eve that gets out at midnight. They all like Jesus. Can't you see it in their Facebook history? It's just that they don't worship him.

But we believed in him. We did receive him. That's all a person can do when you are handed a baby. "Here, you want to hold her?" the proud parents ask me when I go over to talk to them about baptism. "Why, yes, I would love to hold her." And I do and I do. She is going to be a sister in the faith one day, so I am eager to show her love and consideration already now as we speed that day of her baptism on.

The world did not receive him, but we received him. We received him by faith. That's what this day is about. Our receiving the baby Jesus by faith. We believed in him. This is our Savior from sin. This little child holds the eternal future of every human being in his tiny hands.

We are born of God. We believed in Jesus. We are rightful Children of God.

"Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God (12-13)."

John is amazingly frank. There are lots of reasons why people come into the world. We come into the world the proud mix of blood lines. Italian. German, Norwegian, Hungarian, British, Irish, Arab, Nigerian, Chinese, Japanese, Thai, Korean. You can read the natural descent in our faces and the way our hair grows. It doesn't show in our personalities, but our natural descent shows on our skin and, once in an unfortunate while in the diseases that stick to our unique genetics. There are wonderful, beautiful people who come into our world as a result of night-time terrible lies that the other promises to believe. There are precious children who come into the world because a husband overruled his wife and got his way.

John doesn't mince any words. Passion and madness flow in our veins.

But that's not how Children of God come into this world. That's not the explanation for us believing in the saving name of the baby Jesus. We weren't born into the faith as a birthright of simply being human, as though we were little angels when we came into the world, trailing wisps of heaven and the Holy Spirit. We

were born with the ability to think and learn. We weren't born with the ability to believe. Our parents' faith didn't automatically get transferred to us, like the color of their eyes or the texture of their hair did. And we didn't become Children of God because of a decision made for us or by us. My Catechism students will be using the Christmas break to memorize Luther's wonderful words, "I cannot by my own thinking or choosing believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to him."

Children of God come into the world by being born of God. As God sent the baby Jesus to this world, God sends faith into our hearts. The Holy Spirit overshadowed the Virgin Mary and created a chaste, holy and pure miracle within her. Where there was no life before, now there was life and that life was the Son of God, the second person of the Trinity, taking upon himself human flesh and blood, taking upon himself a human soul. The Holy Spirit also created a miracle when he came to us through the Gospel, the message of our salvation through the life and death this baby Jesus would experience, when he came to us through the Gospel and created faith in our hearts. It was God's decision to send the baby Jesus into our world. It was God's decision to send his Holy Spirit into our hearts. It was God's decision that we became Children of God.

That is what matters. So much of the Christmas celebrations are tradition. But traditions change or fall by the wayside. A neighborhood doesn't put up the lights like it used to. Now that the kids are gone the Christmas tree becomes a little smaller and the pile of presents are not as large. The songs the children sang for their Christmas program a generation ago may be so outdated and hard to learn that new songs have taken their place. Caroling, mulled wine, the Yuletide log and figgy pudding? We barely know what some of those things mean any more. Some sharp college student even now is scheming to get his Ph.D. by tracing the evolution of Northern European Christmas customs in a pluralistic American society.

If our faith were a tradition where would that leave us? Is that Christmas tree strong enough to get us to heaven? Will the wrapping paper cover over a multitude of sins? Will the secret orange and cranberry relish be our only abiding memorial to coming generations? If our faith were tradition our chances would look as bleak as the sale of 2018 calendars come March 1.

Our faith is based on God's choice, God's will, God's plan and God's actions. He wanted us to be Children of God. He brought us into the world. He so placed us in the world that we would come into contact with his Gospel promise, good news of great joy for all the people. A Savior has been born for you! He gave us spiritual birth through that message when he brought us to faith. He will keep that faith strong even to the last Christmas spent on this earth.

We can change our mind. We've done it a million times in the weeks leading up to today as we looked at special gifts. We can change our traditions. Live tree families move on to artificial trees and, dissatisfied with the drab green go for a white and silver plastic tree with a color wheel that makes it look positively

radioactive. Look mom! A tree from Chernobyl! We can even change families, but I won't go into that. Life is not always sugar plum dreams and nutcracker ballerinas. Isn't it great that God can make life better?

God will not change his mind. He has loved you with an eternal love. God will not move on. He has set his gaze on you, the apple of his eye and he is stuck on you. There is no one else he desires in heaven more than you. And he will never change families. That's why he sent his Son to make us his sons and daughters, the Children of God.

And did you catch that one marvelous phrase John used? "He gave the right to become children of God." Because of what this tiny little baby born in Bethlehem would do, heaven would be our right. Heaven would belong to us. Heaven would have our name written all over it. For anyone else to take our place would be theft of the highest order. The right. Rightfully yours. Rightfully mine.

We speak of our constitutional rights. Our government will go to any lengths to defend them. We speak of the Bill of Rights. This is why we do things the way we do in America and it is greatly different from all other countries. But these rights are simply rights claimed and bestowed by human beings, human beings as fallible as we are. Yet these rights remain, the backbone of our country's liberty. How much more the rights accorded us by our Almighty Lord? We can have a bit of uncertainty and guesswork as to what Santa has brought under the tree. There is no uncertainty as to what God has given us this Christmas and for all time.

Born of God

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2. We are rightful Children of God (12-13).

So Merry Christmas from one member of the family to his brothers and sisters in the family of God, born of God each one of you, born of God, each one of us!