

12/31/23 Sermon for Austin Heights Baptist Church

“Let it be the Gospel of Christ that is preached
And the very word of God that is heard. Amen.”

What keeps the wild hope of Christmas alive year after year
in a world notorious for dashing all hopes?

It is the haunting dream
that the child who was born that day
may yet be born again even in us.”

Frederick Beuchner wrote this , and
I offer it for us as we begin today.

Every year I receive a beautiful and special
Christmas card from my friends,
two Benedictine monks who run
the Holy Cross Monastery in Woodville.

I know these two monks pretty well
because I have been to the monastery
on retreat several times.

Generally their cards feature a photograph
they have taken on their travels
during the preceding year.

One year recently, the photo on the front of the card
was of the Kiedricher Madonna, c 1330,
from the church of St. Valentin, in Kiedrich, Germany.

But it wasn't the photo so much that I loved—
it was the quote inside the card:

“What good is it to me that Mary
gave birth to the Son of God
1300 years ago, and I do not also
give birth to the Son of God
in my time and in my culture?”

This was written by Johannes Eckhart von Hochheim,
widely known to us now as Meister Eckhart,
a German theologian, philosopher, and mystic,
in the year 1300, about 700 years ago.

Let me read it again:

“What good is it to me that Mary
gave birth to the Son of God
1300 years ago, and I do not also
give birth to the Son of God
in my time and in my culture?”

So today, on the first Sunday after Christmas Day,

I am pondering:

What would it mean to us
to give birth to Jesus
in our time and in our culture,
two millennium later:
how can Jesus be born fresh and new
in you, in me, in 2023, in Nacogdoches, Texas?

I will share with you
a particular moment that happened to me
right here in this church on Christmas Eve.

I attended your Carol service at 6 pm,

my first time to do so.

Normally, I'm all in the midst of

our Christmas Eve mass at Christ Episcopal Church.

Busy, busy helping tend to all the moving parts—

the Choir concert before the service, all the lighting

to arrange and oversee, the little candles in flimsy paper holders

to hand out and get lit at just the right moment when

the lights go down , and

“Silent Night is sung” well, anyway,

this year we didn't do a Christmas Eve mass at

Christ Episcopal Church, for the first time ever,

because we don't have a priest,

and so I was here, in this very place... early,

in the dark, watching as the room grew gradually less dim,

as people entered, and silently put their candles on the

railings here...

And then...we all began to sing the old familiar

carols, in unison, no organ, no incense,

just the holy, ordinary lot of us in warm clothes,

and little kids, and singing and breathing together.

Carol by carol, only first verses, which we all know,

so no fumbling of hymnals or song sheets....

I completely gave myself up to the Spirit of the

holy night, surrounded by song,

breathing, breathing, breathing

all together, as though we were all

breathing in unison,

in the dark,

and waiting together, giving birth to the Babe

arriving in our midst.

It was most extraordinary,

and I will never forget it.

That, my friends, is how

we give birth to the Son of God in our time

and in our place.

This was a blessed experience of the reality of

the gloriously impossible birth of God

to humankind.

Here is another story of birthing Jesus right here...

Many moms and dads come to

the Christmas Shared Blessing

Love in the Name of Christ sets up every year.

Parents having trouble providing Santa

due to economic hardships,

sign up to come

and select new toys and books for their kids,

and have them gift wrapped to take home.

All day long

they flow through the Expo Center hall,

choosing their children's Christmas gifts,

and enjoying coffee and cookies

baked for them by loving community hearts.

When my team took a lunch break,

a young woman was introduced to us.

In heavily accented, but fluent English, she said,

“I want to say thank you to all of you today.

I'm saying thank you for myself, and for my kids,

but I am saying thank you for everyone else

you have helped today

who may not have said thank you.

Maybe they didn't say thank you because they forgot,

or because they didn't have time,

or maybe they didn't know how. So

I am thanking you for all of us.

If it weren't for this day,

my children would not have

any Christmas gifts this year.

In fact, she said, as tears began to fill her eyes,

when I came here,

I didn't have anything...

I didn't have a bed,

I didn't have any clothes,

I didn't have pots to cook food for my kids.

But because of you, because of Love in the Name of Christ,

I have beds, and my kids have clothes, and shoes, and a jacket,

and because of HOPE, we can eat.

So, I say thank you, and God bless you all.”

Jesus is born in Bethlehem as a stranger,
as a migrant, as a refugee,
a helpless babe with nothing but a few bands of cloth
and some straw to keep him warm,
no bed, but a manger in a cave.

Jesus has more in common
with that woman who gave thanks
than with most of us in this room,
we with our warm homes decorated
with sparkling lights and greenery,
and fragrant candles
and plenty of cookies and goodies left over
from our Christmas feasts this week.

Was Jesus born new in this mother,
as people she didn't even know worked
to bring a little joy to her children at Christmas?

I think so.

Is Jesus born new
in the broken Gaza hospital
when doctors facing horrible conditions
continue to offer mercy and care to suffering people?
I think so.

Is Jesus born new in the Ukraine, in Sudan,
in Venezuela, in Syria– in all places of
suffering, fear, and death
when people of good will seek to
ease suffering and do mercy?
I think so.

The birth of Jesus happens
whenever we bring the love of the living Christ
into the darkness and fear of another's life.

The good news of Christmas
is that the birth of the baby in Bethlehem–
the Word becoming flesh and dwelling within us,

is God's promise that God will meet us
where we are,
in our actual poverty,
or in the poverty of spirit
that can come to anyone
who experiences
emptiness in the midst of plenty,
depression, grief, illness,
loneliness, addiction and estrangement...
in a time such as this
that is "supposed" to be all about joy and celebration.

For Christians, power is always hidden
in the powerless,
just as God was hidden inside a poor baby
two thousand years ago.

In Jesus, God made
a perfect union of divine and human.

The incarnation in Bethlehem tells us
that we do not have to leave the world
or become better than we naturally are
to know God...

All we must do is turn away from evil,
which in our time and our culture,
just as it was in Jesus' time,
means turning away from greed, and self-righteousness
and corruption and selfish ways.

It means finding the place within yourself
that knows what it is like to be a stranger.

to hunger
or thirst, or to be needful...
even in 2023 Nacogdoches.

If we can respond from that place
within ourselves,
that place that knows what it is like to need love.
and then endeavor to *embody* that love,

Christ's freely given, merciful, regenerating,

grace-upon-grace filled love–

then we can birth the Christ,

for someone who so desperately needs to see Him.

For it is only in us,

imperfect and human as we are,,

that God, both perfectly hidden and perfectly revealed

comes forth, and is born in us.

I am sure most of you are familiar with this prayer:

Hail Mary, full of grace,

The Lord is with thee,

Blessed art thou amongst women,

and blessed is the fruit of your womb Jesus.

This is the message of the Incarnation.

This is how the Word becomes flesh.

I've lived with this prayer for many years,

but it is only recently that I read a teaching by the

Rev. Peter Woods who suggests that

this is a prayer that I can pray for myself,

that you can pray for yourself.

I could pray it like this...

Greetings, Wanda , full of grace,

The Lord is with you.

Blessed are you amongst people,

and blessed is the fruit of your life, Jesus.

I am suggesting we can pray the “Hail Mary”

and insert our names in Mary’s place,

because this is the essential meaning of

Word becoming flesh.

So if I can say it line by line:

Greetings, Wanda, full of grace (*where would I be without Amazing Grace?*)

The Lord is with you. (*always, till the end of the age*)

Blessed are you amongst people (*because, somehow, this Good News found me!*)

and blessed is the fruit of your life, Jesus. (*All that is good about me is God's Spirit's fruiting in my life.*)

The Christian message clearly speaks

of the path of the disciple

being a path of dying to self

so that Christ can be born in the follower

Jesus is being birthed in every Christ follower

as his word of love, compassion, forgiveness,

healing, peace; all of it—

comes and takes flesh

in your life and mine.

The Incarnation of the Word of God

into human flesh

happens first in Jesus

and that is what we are celebrating

this Christmastide.

The Incarnation doesn't end there though.

It is the ongoing fruit of transformation

of my life and yours,

by the Word incarnate in us.

May your life and mine be transformed

by God's word, Jesus –

and may we all embody his Spirit.

Please pray with me the last stanza of

Phillips Brook's beautiful carol –

O holy Child of Bethlehem!

Descend to us, we pray;

Cast out our sin, and enter in,

Be born in us to-day.

We hear the Christmas angels

The great glad tidings tell;

Oh, come to us, abide with us,

Our Lord Emmanuel!

Amen.

