

A sermon preached on Christmas Eve at Trinity Episcopal Church, Wethersfield, CT.  
 December 24, 2022 by The Rt. Rev. Gordon P. Scruton  
 Isaiah 9:2-7. Psalm 96. Titus 2:11-14. Luke 2:1-20

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Since we were very young, most of us have known the joyful story of Christ's birth in Bethlehem. This year, I invite you to wonder with me...do you and I really know the full story of the significance of God coming to earth to live among us?

Mary and Joseph knew part of the story before Christ was born. But they did not fully grasp that Jesus would not only be born and raised as their child, but that he had to be about his Father's business when he was 12 and they traveled to the Temple in Jerusalem.

They didn't fully grasp what it would be like for Jesus to leave the family home & carpentry business and embark on his public ministry across the cities and towns of Israel.

They didn't realize what it would be like to watch Jesus be crucified on a cross, or raised from the dead, or ascend into heaven.

They could not imagine how the Spirit of Jesus would continue to sustain and guide, bring hope and joy to people down through the centuries and all around the world, through all life's unfolding surprises and struggles.

They couldn't comprehend how the Christ, who was there at the beginning of Creation, as well as in Bethlehem, would continue to hold together the ever-expanding universe that we are only now becoming aware of through the Webb telescope.

They could not imagine the Cosmic Christ reigning within and over the whole Universe for eternity, after what we know as planet earth comes to an end.

The truth is, you and I, like Mary and Joseph, the Angels and shepherds, cannot begin to imagine what this child will keep doing for the hope and joy, the healing and sustaining of the whole universe, as well as our little lives on this fragile earth.

As I look back over my life, I am in awe of how year after year, God keeps opening my mind and heart, your mind and heart, to an ever-increasing understanding and appreciation of the holy mystery of God coming to be among us in Christ.

Tonight, we have 12 days of Christmas ahead of us. The purpose of these 12 days is to invite us to keep expanding and deepening our appreciation of Christ's coming among us. So I'm going to suggest three practices you and I might experiment with in these next 12 days to help us recognize and experience more of the gifts Christ came to bring us.

The first practice I invite you to consider is, to take out your Bible at home, and if you don't have a Bible you can use your computer, to read again the story of Christ's coming to

earth in the first chapters of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Some Gospels take a couple of chapters to tell the story, some take just a few verses. Mark says nothing about the birth of Christ. You will quickly notice how differently each one tells the story of Christ's coming to earth. They each have different perspectives. The early Christians did not try to decide which writer told the story best.

They knew that the mystery of God coming to earth in Christ exceeds what any one of us can understand. So they, and we, need all four Gospel versions of the story to help us see the larger perspective of Christ's coming among us.

For example, Matthew tells us about the evil forces that worked through political jealousy and violent actions of King Herod to try and kill the baby Jesus by slaughtering all the baby boys in Bethlehem at that time. Yet God, through a dream, saved the life of Jesus by guiding Joseph to take Mary and Jesus and flee to Egypt as refugees from Herod's political violence.

Years later, on Good Friday, Christ experienced another encounter with evil forces, political jealousy, and violent actions of some powerful people who crucified him.

Some of you, and people you know, may be experiencing the dark and painful elements of life this Christmas. We can't help but feel and pray for the millions of people in this country and around the world who are suffering tonight from the cold, from injustice, political oppression, hunger, violence, wars, poverty, sickness, addiction, loneliness, marginalization and those who are near death.

God's rescue of the baby Jesus, God's raising Jesus from his Good Friday death on Easter morning, show us that we don't need to fear evil forces or violent people, even when we live in and walk through the valley of the shadow of death. God is still with us as our Good Shepherd. Nothing in the universe, not evil forces or cruel tyrants or unjust political and economic systems, absolutely nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

You see, there really is much more to this Christmas story than we often recognize. As you read again the four Gospel stories of God entering life on this planet in Christ, ask the Holy Spirit to open up in you fresh awareness of the meaning Christ's birth that you have not yet imagined.

A second practice I invite you to consider is to imagine yourself as Mary. What would it be like if you were carrying Jesus in your body, in your heart? Pregnant women eat differently, walk differently, think differently when they know they are carrying a miracle of life in their body.

How might you and I live each day differently if we recognize that we were actually carrying Jesus in our bodies; that the very life, the presence of God is living in our hearts, at the cellular and spiritual level?

Paul prayed this kind of imaginative prayer for the early Christians in Ephesus. In chapter 3 he prays “that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith...that you may know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.” You see, Christ’s coming to earth through Mary, is not only a story about the past. Christ wants us to wake up and recognize that he keeps coming to earth every day through your body, my body. We, like Mary, carry all the loving fullness of God within us.

During these next 12 days, I invite you to think often about the fact that you are carrying Christ, carrying all the loving fullness of God in your body. Let the reality of Christ living in you fill you with overwhelming gratitude and joy and awe.

A third practice I invite you to experiment with is to imagine yourself as Joseph. Joseph did not say anything, but he had a deep spiritual awareness of God in his life. He was aware of God speaking to him through his dreams, and through an angel. He acted on what he knew God was saying to him. Humanly speaking, he should have divorced Mary, been angry and embarrassed, felt betrayed by Mary for carrying a child which he knew was not his physical child. But Joseph followed the guidance God gave him, took Mary as his wife, cared for and protected her, even though it was very different from what he and his society expected.

Joseph also recognized that God was alive and at work in Mary and Jesus. They were not just a young woman and a baby. God was living in and through them both. In caring for Mary and Jesus, Joseph knew he was also caring for and loving God in them.

Like Joseph, we can ask the Holy Spirit to help us recognize the unexpected ways, people and situations through which God may be guiding us. And we can ask the Holy Spirit to help us see God alive and at work in those very unlikely people and situations.

Who are the unlikely people, the uncomfortable people, God is calling you to reach out to and care for? Don’t look at the people around you from a merely human perspective. Each person, like Mary, is carrying the presence of God. In Genesis we read that God created every person in the image and likeness of God. As the Quakers say, there is “that of God” in each person God created.

Some people are not aware that they are God’s creations and some rebel against living as God created them to live. They find their being in greed and anger and serve only themselves. They don’t recognize, respect and love the God given dignity of every person, including themselves. But still, every person is created in the image and likeness of God. God sent us, like he sent Joseph, to recognize God’s presence in the lives of others around us and to care for, pray for and support others who need our help. They may be family members. They may be people in need around us or around the world. During the next 12 days of Christmas, you and I can keep asking God to help us recognize the presence of God in unlikely people and situations around us...and help us to pray and care for those unlikely people in their situations of struggle and need.

Do you see how there is much more to the story of Christmas than merely Christ's birth at Bethlehem? Do you see the role of Jesus Christ in God's cosmic unfolding of the universe? Do you see how Jesus wants to keep entering and living on this planet every day, through your body, mind and spirit, through your relationships, through your way of life?

Let us close our eyes for a few moments...please take a slow deep breath...be aware that the same Jesus who was born of Mary in Bethlehem is right here with us at this moment, living in your body, in your heart, in all of our hearts. Just be in awe and thank God for this amazing gift and miracle.

Now, ask the Christ who is within you, how he may want to help you grow in your awareness of Christ dwelling in your heart during the next 12 Days of Christmas .... How might Christ be inviting you to see God's presence in the unlikely people around you? .... are there particular people God might be inviting you to care for in the next 12 days, as Joseph cared for Mary? ...

"O Holy Child of Bethlehem, descend to us we pray; cast out our sin and enter in, be born in us today. We hear the Christmas angels the great glad tidings tell; O come to us, abide with us, our Lord Emmanuel!" Amen. (Hymn 79, v. 5.)