

First Congregational United Church of Christ
Christmas Eve- December 24, 2023

A CHRISTMAS MEDITATION

Our waiting is over. Today we sing our Christmas carols, we read our Christmas Scriptures, and we light our Christmas candles because the time of Christmas has come. We celebrate the Incarnation of God.

That big word, “incarnation” isn’t in the Bible. You won’t find it in any of the gospel stories of Jesus’ birth or anywhere else in the New or Old Testament. But in trying to make sense of the mystery of the child that is born to Mary, the church has long thought about “Incarnation” with a capital ‘I’. The prelude from St. John’s gospel that we heard a few moments ago got us started on it. John speaks of the Word being made flesh and dwelling among us.

Taking our cue from him, we now say that in this Christmas baby God who is outside of time enters time; that God who is infinite becomes finite; and that God who is all-powerful becomes all-vulnerable. The key to thinking about the Incarnation is to think small. We often assume that thinking big, bold, and brash is better, but the Incarnation points us to God coming to be with us in the small, the humble, and the quiet.

In baby Jesus, the big, loud, and accustomed ways of our world are turned upside down and inside out. In our time, for instance, we look at the awful divisions in our own country, or at the terrible hostilities in places like Palestine, Israel, Ukraine, Russia, and elsewhere. We see these and become accustomed to the broad, rough, and grinding roar of seemingly endless conflict, violence, and war.

But today we remember that God’s might- *God’s* might- comes to us in the soft cries of a young mother’s child. In the manger, we see that God’s power- the *ultimate* power- is displayed not in weapons of killer destruction, but in the vulnerable cries of a newborn baby. To honor God, we never resort to harsh bluster or nasty insult. We don’t rely on bulging muscles, the big stick, or might makes right. Instead, we worship the true God who comes to us as a baby.

On this day we try our best to fathom how great this gift is. So often we’re driven to compete *falsely* against ourselves and each other. We scramble on ladders of presumed “success”, trying desperately to prove our worth or even our superiority. We think we *must* be on top at home, at work, in the classroom, at play, in the time we give to the church and community, in the place that we hold in the world of nations. It’s as if the old heresy of works righteousness is still stuck in our bones even when we’ve never heard of it.

If only we work hard enough, look good enough, make enough money, achieve enough status, or gain enough power, then surely, we will earn the acceptance and approval of family, friends, and the wider world. If only we worship earnestly enough, pray long enough, give generously enough, and love selflessly enough, then certainly at last we will, and above all, earn God’s eternal favor.

But thank heaven, in the face of this restless, zero-sum, and futilely competitive bent, Mary’s baby says, “Stop”. Little Lord Jesus puts the brakes on all our exhausting attempts to be our own saviors.

Hallelujah for Christmas time! In this holy season, we see again that we can never work our way up to God, but that God becomes small and bends down to be with us- a living, breathing, flesh-and-blood gift of pure grace bundled up in a young girl's arms.

Today, we celebrate God born in a stable with lowly shepherds as the first ones to hear and to come. They're there for all of us, each of us who in our own way have become hardened by life, bruised and scarred, calloused and worn out by our personal struggles and the world's deep brokenness. Like the shepherds, we huddle in the night and keep watch. We gaze up in hope for light that the darkness will not overcome. We run in wonder to God who is born in our flesh, committed to us completely in the stunning mercies of a baby who lies in the straw.

Maybe you remember Silas Marner in George Eliot's classic story. He's a reclusive and gloomy man who gives himself only to his weaving and to his accumulation of gold, which he hides under his bed. One day the gold is gone. A thief *must* have taken it. Silas is sure of it and he's totally distraught.

He comes home every evening, hoping beyond hope that the gold somehow has reappeared. One night, he sees a glint of light on the floor. His heart leaps. It must be his gold! But when he bends down and stretches out his hand, he feels not hard coins, but soft curls. Beneath his bed lies a sleeping child.

Eliot writes: "(Silas) had a dreamy feeling that this child was somehow a message come to him from a far-off life. It stirred old quiverings of tenderness- old impressions of awe of some power presiding over his life . . .

Eliot continues: "(We) older human beings, with our inward turmoil, feel a certain awe in the presence of a little child, such as we feel before some quiet majesty or beauty in the earth or sky."

This message, this power, this majesty, and this beauty come to us today. We stagger in from the rush and hurry of this season, worn out by another year of chasing whatever misleading form gold takes in our lives. But here we're moved once more into tender awe. We see God incarnate in this baby.

George Eliot says that Silas took the little girl in his lap, "trembling with an emotion mysterious to himself, at something unknown dawning on his life. He could only have said that the child had come instead of the gold- that the gold had turned into the child."

God's astonishing grace and truth dawn on us today in the golden child of Bethlehem. Divine light shines from him and the darkness cannot overcome it. In the roar of all our conflicts, violence, and war, in the noise of all our other scurrying about to try to prove our worth, this baby sings to us the melody of peace. He is the small, humble, and quiet way in which God comes to save us- we who so easily get lost in the big, the loud, the high, and the mighty.

Let every heart prepare him room. Amen.