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Incarnation C
December 25, 2006

“Be Not Afraid”

Augustine said: “If nobody asks me about it, I know.

If I want to explain it to someone, I do not know.”

It is unfathomable by any human measure that God could/would come into this world as a human being, as a baby, just like you and me. How could someone like one of us save the world?

Bethlehem, that ancient city, is today a place of fierce fighting. But there was a day when it was the birthplace of the “Prince of Peace.” Christmas: the nativity of God in skin...the humanization of God...the birth on which some will unquestionably choke --- those who might respect Christianity as a noble cause, a moral force, or the central religion of Western civilization --- but will be unable to swallow it.

Emmanuel ... “God with us”...that is what catches in their throats. That the great Creator of galaxies and suns and planets in their courses, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the uncaused First Cause, the Ineffable and Unutterable is born as a mere ‘babe in a manger.’ Wow!

The story is told in two verses. Yes, in our reading tonight, two verses are given to the birth of Jesus, the babe in the manger. The reign of this King

has lasted for over 2000 years and we get two verses while Gibbons “Rise and Fall...” gets 12 volumes for just a few hundred years.

For the first 21 years of my life I began every Christmas morning at the top of the stairs with brothers and sisters and parents and grandparents and the youngest reader read Luke chapter two: “*And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that all the world should be taxed ... And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn....*” What was at the bottom of the steps is what the world said was most important but our family said it was the story of a God who would be born like us that carried this day and every day.

We are not called here each year to make a new story but rather we are to struggle with understanding God’s coming to us and thus our going into the world to be Him to a needy world. Perhaps the best we can do is what Mary did: “ponder them in [our] hearts.”

God comes to a distant place with no fanfare...he is born to an ordinary couple under less than ordinary circumstances...the first ones to carry the story forward are those least thought of in the community, shepherds...and the words with which we are left are “Don’t be Afraid?”

The Greek word for “truth” means “making manifest the hidden.” Paul would describe it as “looking through a mirror dimly.” Truth is not apparent, but is a veiled reality that must be discovered. It is not something naturally possessed but rather it is something hidden deeply within the human beneath the surface of life. Unlike the surface of existence, which moves about continually like waves on the ocean, making life delusive --- depth is eternal and certain, and it is the abiding place of truth.

The truth of Christmas is that God has done something new and unique in history --- and in our individual lives. And that something is Jesus.

But the real beauty of this special day of Christmas must be discovered --- this Truth above all truths. It is like waiting at the top of those stairs with greatest expectation and digging again into the ancient story and clamoring down the steps to grasp some fleeting gift only to realize that the real gift was in the story at the top of the stairs. The real Truth of Christmas must be experienced in the depth of our lives, not simply on the level of surface celebration or acknowledgment.

We have rushed around like Chicken Little for weeks trying to find the perfect gift not realizing that the ‘perfect gift’ has already been given us by a God who loves us and will do literally anything to show us. We are called this night to descend from the glitz of commercialism’s best season, to

the depth of the heart, where we open ourselves to Emmanuel's holy presence.

That Holy Presence finds us at the oddest of times. I am reminded of the wonderful Christmas Story of Paul Harvey entitled "The Man and the Birds." It is about a man who will not attend the Christmas Eve service with his family because he "just couldn't swallow the Jesus Story, about God coming to Earth as a man." I will not retell the story in full but after his family leaves he sits down with his paper only to hear some thumping on his front porch. A terrible snow storm/blizzard is blowing and some birds are trapped on his porch as they thump, thump, thump against his front window trying to escape the storm. He couldn't just leave them to freeze so he tries numerous ways to save them but to the birds he was "a strange and terrifying creature" and they would not let him close or trust him. He was beside himself to help when he thought "If only I could be a bird...then I could tell them not to be afraid...they could understand." At that moment the church bells began to ring. He listened to the bells and then sank to his knees in the snow.

Tonight we come to "Sink to our Knees" before God's great Truth, His greatest mystery. He has come to us, this "Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace" not as a conquering emperor but

rather as a “babe, lying in a manger.” He could not save us had he not come to be ‘with us’ and ‘like us.’

Yes, sink to your knees before God’s loving truth. A child once said: “I wish I had a picture of God.” This is exactly what we are granted in the birth of Jesus --- for us, for the whole world. Amen.