

## “The REAL power of Christmas”

December 23, 2007

Text: *Isaiah 7:10-16, Matthew 1:18-25*

### I.

For almost two thousand years, we have been retelling the Christmas story at this time of year. To say that it is part of our tradition is to somehow understate it. It's more than that. We're talking about *the Christmas story*. Over the centuries, this story is woven into our very foundations as a religious people.

It would be unseemly, if not impossible, to think of ourselves apart from it. Can you imagine life without the Christmas story? Hardly!

And what's powerful about the story is how it pulsates with *vulnerability*. It's the *vulnerability* that *draws us in*. Think about it!

- To begin with, there's Joseph and Mary ... and all the uncertainty about their relationship. She's pregnant ... and apparently before they got married (the biblical text suggests it was by the *Holy Spirit*).
- And now, they're off to Bethlehem for the census ... in unfamiliar surroundings.
- And then, the time comes for her to give birth ... what to do? Could they have ended up at a more unpretentious place? At a lowly stable, the story goes, because there was *no room at the inn* (How often have we heard those words, *No room at the inn?*).
- And more still, there's the vile Herod menacing nearby.

Again, there's *vulnerability* everywhere. Could there be a more human story? At some point, we can all relate.

### II.

The simplicity, the *down-to-earthness* of the Christmas story is, of course, part of its beauty.

We don't have to sort through multiple layers of social strata to get at it.

- It's got nothing to do with income (how much you make) ...
- or with status or privilege (who you know) ...
- or with achievement (how successful you've been) ...
- or with fame ... or anything else.

At least this much of the message is clear: *God doesn't care about what's on the surface—on the outside—but what's in the heart.* And that's where the Christmas story takes us.

The REAL power of Christmas is that in the *humanity* of the story, in the *vulnerability* of it all, we're drawn in. There's a place for us; there's room for us.

The nativity story invites us each year to see ourselves with fresh eyes—as a human being ... remarkably like billions of other human beings inhabiting the planet.

- The *vulnerability* of the Christmas story invites us to GET REAL and to BE REAL ...
- and to realize that we're all connected ... and all interdependent with one another. We all need each other ... we're all in the boat of humanity together.

When we're *vulnerable*, we see this ...

1. We see the inter-relatedness of things.
2. We see the BIG PICTURE of our lives with more clarity. And we remember ... the *holy* words:

*Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son ... and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.*

(Matthew 2:20b-21)

These words of scripture put it all in perspective ... they illumine the *human situation*. That we all have *sins* from which we need to be liberated and set free.

Christmas does this to us, doesn't it? There's a sort of *unspoken* filtering process to Christmas ... where we see things with a sobering honesty, closer to the way they really are.

That's why, just as Christmas is a time of profound joy and happiness (*the best time of the year*), there's often a piercing regret and sadness that surrounds Christmas as well. And strangely, perhaps, it's as time of *truth telling*.

Because, truth be told, we know when things aren't right ... when people aren't where they should be ... and aren't acting like they ought to act. More than we'll ever admit, we know when our lives are not in line with God's purposes.

### III.

In our reading from Isaiah 7, King Ahaz of Judah, in the southern kingdom, is being seriously threatened by an alliance between Rezin, the King of Syria, and Pekah, the

King of the northern kingdom, Israel. This is a most unlikely alliance because Israel in the north and Judah in the south were formerly part of the unified Israel.

All the time, in the ancient world, there were these power plays in the air ... nations maneuvering, with calculation and evil intent, to accrue more power to themselves.

However, as we say all the time: *it is what it is*. And what *it is*, is that King Ahaz is in a tough spot. God somehow wants to reassure him; but the problem is, he's lacking confidence. Out of frustration with him, God speaks to him, saying, *Ask a sign of the Lord your God* ... on the assumption that such a sign would be a good thing.

But King Ahaz resists and doesn't want to do it. He lacks the confidence to be *vulnerable*. Kings are accustomed to being in control and to wielding power, as they see fit. King Ahaz, therefore, doesn't want to give any impression of being fearful or worried about the political and military alliance that is brewing in the north between Syria and Israel (the northern kingdom).

#### IV.

He's not alone in his uneasiness about being *vulnerable*, is he? We're like that too. Who likes being vulnerable? We much prefer to be in control. To be calling the shots ... to be controlling the variables.

What if Ahaz agrees to ask the Lord for a sign but then the sign is not a good one? What if the sign doesn't bode well for Ahaz and the southern kingdom of Judah?

However, Ahaz soon learned what we all know: that *God is going to do what God is going to do*. And God gave King Ahaz a sign anyway. And it was the sign of a young woman with child, about to bear a son, and he would be called *Immanuel*, which means **God with us**.

And then Isaiah gives Ahaz the words of reassurance he must certainly have been hoping for: *that the schemes of his enemies will NOT prevail ... and that soon their homelands will be deserted*.

Having the confidence and the faith to be vulnerable is an undervalued strength. Unfortunately, in our culture, we tend to view *vulnerability* as a *weakness* ... i.e., as a negative ... as a characteristic that somehow diminishes us.

When in fact, it's quite the opposite; *vulnerability* opens us up and invites more people in. Indeed, *vulnerability* IS the human situation.

Allowing ourselves to be *vulnerable* ... putting ourselves in situations where we're not in total control ... opening ourselves to others to the point where there's meaningful *sharing*

... meaningful *dialogue* ... meaningful *give and take* ... enlarges our world and potentially deepens our relationships.

## V.

For example, interacting with people who always know everything grates on us, doesn't it? It's annoying. There's not one thing they're not an expert at. These are the people that never ask any questions ... just to learn ... or be better informed ... or just to show an interest in something outside themselves.

When we show vulnerability, we open ourselves to the possibility that the other person might be able to offer us something ... they might be able to teach us something—about the world situation, history, education, psychology, sports, music or technology, whatever it is.

Obviously, we don't know everything. And everyone can teach us something.

As human beings, we can all benefit from having a chance, now and then, to talk about ourselves ... to brag about this or that ... the things we're proud of in our lives; or just to talk about our lives ... what we're dealing with, what we're working our way through.

Asking sincere questions of one another facilitates this process. And we're healthier as individuals when we have a chance to share our lives. But that can't happen when every conversation we're in is always a *one way* street, going *the other way*.

The *down-to-earth* realities of Christmas invite us in. And when we take an interest in another person—by trying to learn more about them and how things are going in their life (*which is a form of making ourselves vulnerable*)—we make room for them in our lives. We enlarge our world.

Friends, we all need to share our lives ... and to bounce our stories off one another.

Again, the truth of our lives—as individuals and as family and community—is that, at the end of the day, we need each other. And there's nothing wrong with that. In fact, there's a lot *right* with that. *We're social creatures* ... all members of the human family ... and as Christians, part of the **body of Christ** that is the church.

## VI.

The **real power of Christmas** is revealed in our *seeing things more clearly*. In our seeing our lives as they really are ... how, at the end of the day, we're all human beings ... trying to make it through another day of life; and we've all got stuff we're dealing with.

Even the most exalted of us—the most confident and successful and wealthy and on and on—has needs.

When we *see things more clearly*, which Christmas prompts us to do, all pretense is stripped away ... and we can be *real* ... and along the way, we're reminded how fleeting life is ... how we don't have forever ... and, therefore, why not have the confidence to show some *vulnerability*? It's a good thing!

The authentic cry of every human being ought to reflect the words of the **Psalmist** in Psalm 80 (one of our suggested readings for Christmas Sunday):

*Stir up your might, O God, and come to save us!  
Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved.*

At some point, this is the authentic cry of every human being. It is our most basic yearning. And Christmas is God's eternal answer: ***Come, O Holy One, come!***

**All praise be unto God! Amen!**

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