

Luke 2: 1-20

God Is Like Christmas

Dec. 24, 2012 / The Cathedral of St. Philip, Atlanta

The Rt. Rev. Robert C. Wright, Bishop

Christmas is finally here. And, all that's left to do is worship. The stuff is done. As done as it's going to get. The parties are finished. The gifts are bought. The cards have been received. We're here now. Breathe. Be here now. All that's left to do is worship. That's the best part of Christmas. The worship. You would expect me to say that being a churchman and all. But I don't mean the church service necessarily. I mean worship. I mean the thing that happens in the church and outside of the church. When people take the time to remember that life is fleeting, but God is forever. Worship. When you look back over your life and you are suddenly flooded with the fact of God's outrageous goodness to you. Worship. Something real has come into the world tonight. Something complete is visiting us. Something has gained entry to our hearts that is more real than anything else. It hasn't come because we're good. Worship is responding. We have to become more real. We become what we worship. We have to worship God. I pray that happens to us here tonight.

\*

We've heard a lot about God over the last few days. Why does God allow tragedy? Where was God? How could God allow this? All legitimate questions. As we grow with God, each of us will have to find our own peace with those kinds of questions. But Christmas helps us find some of our answers. Christmas answers the why, the where and the how questions with the what. What is God really like? That is the most important question. You know the story. God comes during a particular political climate in Palestine. The emperor called for a gathering. Registration for the purpose of taxation was the stated reason. Rome wanted to avoid their fiscal cliff too. Into this real world. Messy world. Sometimes brutal world. He comes. He comes wrapped in rags. Wrapped in love. Riding on a promise. Always riding on a promise. God always comes as a promise first. God is like that. God promised Israel that a descendant of David's would reign, and his kingdom would have no end. Jesus is that descendant.

God promised Mary she would give birth to a boy; she did. God promised Elizabeth, an infertile senior citizen, would give birth to a son; she did. God promised Joseph that all of this was actually of God. And, it is. God always comes as promise first. And, God is not slack concerning God's promises as many are. You can be naughty or nice and still get a promise from God. You don't have to be sleek or strong or organized or efficient for God to keep a promise to you. You can be old or young. A somebody or a wanna be. Grieving or rejoicing. God has a promise for you. That's where the growth is for us. Holding onto the promises in low valleys. Holding onto the promises when it doesn't make sense by the world's standards. Mary did that. Joseph did that. Somebody tonight is doing that. Christmas is all of that. But what does God promise? God only promises God's self. He doesn't promise a rose garden. Just an ever-unfolding friendship amidst the vicissitudes of life. He promises that if we will abide with him, we will come to the joy making knowledge that He is more than anything we face. Far more. That's the promise God is best at keeping. No protective hedges. Sorry about that. We worship a real world God. Christmas is for big boys and big girls. God's best promise, the one that God is best at keeping, is that God "will never leave you or forsake you." Right now. Invoked or not. Always with us. Because, that is His promise.

\*\*

What is God like? God is like Christmas! It's just like God to get the good news to the shepherds first. Who were these guys? They were working the late-night shift. Day laborers but at night. Guys trying to make a buck. No pedigrees. Outside of the city. Outside of the system.

That's who gets the light show, the angelic choir concert and the word first. By right the announcement should have happened in the temple, with all the people like me standing around. But it doesn't. And we can't tell God how God should be God. Isaiah said it best, "Our thoughts are not his thoughts; neither are our ways his ways." What can God possibly be up to by this? It has to be that God wants to jar our sense of order so we might finally be open to his order, "to a more excellent way." And new ways and new openness are born in the imagination. God wants our imaginations. That's got to be it. I remember hearing

about the very energetic kindergartener who was in church one Christmas eve. After being told to stop standing in the pews and to sit down repeatedly by his mommy, his father reached over and physically made him sit down. To which the little boy said to his parents, "I may be sitting down on the outside, but I am standing up on the inside." This kid's onto something. The world flattens our imagination, even with all the technology. Seldom when we watch the news or read the newspaper are we impressed by real imagination brought to bear for the good of the world. I read an article in the New York Times not long ago that was calling into question the way we teach our young people. The author went on to say there is such a lack of imagination when it comes to teaching in some of our schools, "we would have made a postal clerk out of Beethoven." Lack of imagination and not simply partisan politics may be what we are suffering from in Washington, D.C. But God begs for our imagination always and especially at Christmas. It is the poetry of Christmas that comes to shake us loose of ossified faith expressions. Christmas comes to keep us open to the scandal that is God. Virgin births. Outsiders moved to the head of the line. Angels visiting. Wolves dwelling with lambs, leopards lying down with goats, calves and young lions together.

Valleys rising. Mountains bowing. All this, with a little child leading the whole outrageous parade. Why? To move us closer to the day when we could believe that nothing is impossible for God! Closer to leaning on his understanding, not our own. Closer to the day when we could ask the psalmist's question, "Who is like the Lord?" And then answer resoundingly from our own souls: nobody! If we would allow this Christmas to move us there, we would be more trustworthy with the glory of the Lord, just like the shepherds. Imagination becomes possibility and possibility becomes hope. And, "hope in God does not disappoint us." Hope in God produces joy. God is just like Christmas.

\*\*\*

But not only that, God is more than God's promises. God is more than his imagination stretching inspiration. God is love. That's what God is like. And that is why at the perfect time according to God's clock, "It was the Father's good pleasure for all his fullness to dwell in Jesus." "Yes God has spoken to us in days gone by through the prophets. But at this time

he has spoken to us by his Son, who is the brightness of his glory and the expressed image of his person.” For love’s sake, God de-privileged himself to ennoble us. In one sublime act, through this baby, God is within reach of all of us. The angel said, “It was good news of great joy for all people.” Not only for the church but for the world. Don’t be afraid to talk about Jesus. There won’t be any copyright issues. Jesus is not a wholly owned subsidiary of the church. He belongs to the world. Even atheists know Jesus is cool. Pay attention to this baby and he will teach us how to grow up and love. Pay attention to the baby and he will teach us how to share and to not be afraid of the dark. Pay attention to this baby, and he will teach us the deeper things of life and truth. Are you willing to be taught by this child? He can teach us the privilege of our humanity. God is within reach tonight, but not only tonight. Jesus is present every night.

*Shepherds, why this jubilee? Why your joyous strains prolong? What the gladsome tidings be. which inspire your heavenly song?*

Why did they sing? And why must we? Because prose can’t contain the joy. Because God is within reach tonight. And if that is true, then your forgiveness is within reach. Peace is within reach. Healing for your marriage is within reach. A new way forward is within reach. Despair is being dismantled. And if God is within reach, then nothing is beyond his touch. Nothing. Not you, not me. Not this country. Not the church. Not Atlanta, Not Newtown. Not Adam Lanza. Nothing. You’re in the wrong place if you’re looking for polite holiday sentiments. Jesus is the reason for this gathering. And while Jesus is foolishness to some and an obstacle to others, He was given to us, and he stands over the wrecks of time. “And his name shall be called Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.” God is exactly like Christmas. So then be persuaded tonight that nothing can separate us from the Love of God that is in Christ Jesus.” I was dead, then I was alive. I was weeping then laughing. Love came into me and made me fierce like a lion and gentle as an evening star. AMEN.