

Meditations Delivered at Christ Church
December 26th & 27th; the Weekend after Christmas

TEXTS: Luke 2:1-20; John 1:1-14

Delivered by Paul A. Johnson

The message began with the congregation singing "Once in Royal David's City."

The story of Christmas begins not with the name of Jesus, but with the name Augustus. He was the first Caesar, and the world's first great politician to practice that craft on a grand scale. Certainly, he was the most powerful person in the world. Every age has had its top dog. When Mary and Joseph left from Nazareth to be registered for the census, Augustus was that dog.

He was a Roman who lived in Rome. Rome was the grandest city in the world, and still in its ascendancy. Many of the great ancient monuments one visits on a tour of the city—the Coliseum and the Arch of Constantine—were yet to be built when Augustus transformed the Republic into an Empire. But already, 120 years of conquest had made Rome the center of the world. In the city, near the Temple of Saturn, Augustus erected what was known as “the Golden Milestone,” an obelisk that marked the official center of Rome and from which all the mile markers on all the roads to the city were measured. 1400 years later, Chaucer would memorialize the enduring magnetism of the city by writing “Right as diverse pathes leden the folk the righte way to Rome”—the first written expression of “all roads lead to Rome.” But he got the idea from Augustus.

A man named Cecil Francis Alexander wrote the words to the carol we just sang, and most certainly does he exercise poetic license in referring to Bethlehem as a “city.” Rome was “the city.” Jerusalem was “a city.” But Bethlehem...located about six miles from Jerusalem...was at best a village of a few thousand people. And “royal David,” who came from Bethlehem and lived 1000 years before Christ, was a mostly forgotten character to everyone except the Jews.

But only occasionally are the big packages more meaningful than the small, and just because it's got the biggest headline doesn't mean it's the most important story. As often as not, God is revealed in the small and out-of-the-way places in life, and more likely to speak in a whisper than a yell.

There is a godly irony we are to apprehend in the Feast of Christmas; a living out of what theologians have called the great reversal. It's a truth this baby will teach when he gets old enough to speak: “the last shall be first;” “to be the greatest is to be the least;” “as the Son of Man came to serve, so are we to serve;” and the feet of another are there that we might wash them.

With all that Rome was, the drama takes place in Bethlehem. The main actors are a pregnant peasant woman and her man—note: not yet her husband—and shepherds, who were far from the top of the social or religious food chain. The setting isn't a master bedroom with satin sheets and a view; it's a stable or a cave or a lowly cattle shed, as it says in this hymn--but most certainly a manger...the place where cows eat from.

And a baby...not a warrior; not a philosopher; not a politician. A baby...defenseless, dependent, and as baby-like as any baby we've ever seen or held in our arms.

And thus it is that a constant theme of scripture comes to the apex of its gentle crescendo. The Lord is filled with surprises, and shows up in the unlikeliest places...most fully—absolutely fully—in this child.

Three days ago we gathered to celebrate the birth. It was the largest Christmas Eve we've ever celebrated at Christ Church. The music was grand, and the buzz palpable.

But Christmas is a twelve day season, not a single day. And it's like that, I think, so that we can come down a bit; ourselves, get a bit smaller and quieter...more like the lives we live every day; more like Bethlehem than Rome. The big and loud are impressive, but may we despise not the small places, to paraphrase the prophet Zechariah...in our hearts and in our lives. For if that is the kind of place Jesus was born, it is also the places where Jesus continues to show up.

This is Christmas: God comes in ways we don't expect, and in places that would surprise us, and begets his love in the most humble of circumstances, including our own hearts.

Here the congregation sang "Of the Father's Love Begotten."

Aurelius Clemens Prudentius was born about the year 348. He was born to a wealthy family in Spain. Spain had been Roman for 500 years before Prudentius was born, so he grew up a faithful Roman patriot. He was trained as a lawyer, and served the Empire well. Twice he was named provincial governor, and finally he was called to the court of Theodosius I to serve as an advisor.

But his professional accomplishments are a footnote to his life. You see, Prudentius was also a poet. The hymnist John Mason Neale, who wrote "Good Christian Friends Rejoice," called him "the prince of the early Christian poets." Mostly today, it's scholars who study his words. But at some point in his life he wrote a poem called "Corde natus ex parentis," which we know as "Of the Father's Love Begotten."

I saw a list of top ten favorite Christmas carols the other day. This one's not on it. It's not one we sing on Christmas Eve. This might be the first time we've ever sung it here. We've got a bunch of Christmas CDs in our house. I've heard more versions of "O Come All Ye Faithful" and "Silent Night" than I can count. But I think only one includes a recording of this song. It is, for us, a hidden witness.

But when we sing it, stop and ponder...what we're doing is singing the most ancient song we have about the birth of Christ. No other Christmas hymn we know of is as old as this one...almost 1700 years old.

There are times for us to be reminded of how ancient, and yet eternally contemporary, our faith is. For while it is these words are written by someone long gone from this earthly life, they remain true. We sing them, and are connected with the billions of saints who have loved the Lord before us and celebrated the miracle of his birth.

We celebrate Christmas according to our own ways today. But the message remains the same. It always does. It is as true today that the source of Christ's coming is God's love as it was when Prudentius wrote these words, and as it was when the manger was first filled. It has not waned one bit.

These few days after the event, we may each be moving into that period where we assess whether this Christmas was what we wanted it to be; as if the reality of this moment depends upon our own subjective experience. Maybe it was, and maybe it wasn't...

But what we celebrate is an “is.” It is the work of God, and does not depend on how we feel about it. “Ready or not,” to paraphrase the children’s game, the Lord comes. How it is we may each feel today is something only each of us knows. But what we declare is not a feeling, but a truth: that not just a baby, but the Alpha and Omega; the source and the ending comes and is among us...not of blood, or the will of the flesh, or the will of humankind...but because of the Father’s love; which is no feeling; just an “is.”

Here the congregation sang “What Child is This?” followed by the reading of John 1:1-14.

There are those who write the stories, and there are those who teach about the stories that are written. There are those who tell the tales, and there are those who interpret the tales. There are those who tell what happens, and there are those who tell the meaning of what happens. So it is that if Luke is the one who tells the story, John is the one who comments on what it means.

This hymn we just sang was written by a man named William Chatterton Dix. Dix lived in the nineteenth-century, and made a living throughout his life by managing an insurance company. He was also a poet. Mostly, the first portion of his life was lived as uneventfully as anyone else’s.

But sometime in his late twenties he took ill. I don’t know what the illness was. In fact, no one seems to know exactly what it was. But the affect for him was catastrophic, or at least, he thought it was. He almost died, and for a long time it left him bedridden.

Now, illness can do different things to different people. For Dix, it left him in a place of darkness. Sometimes, when we get knocked off our horse, it takes a while for humpty dumpty to get put back together again. Get knocked down, and it leaves us maybe wondering a little bit, and maybe wandering. Things don’t seem as simple as they once did; the ambiguities of life become more vivid; and so it is not uncommon in times of trial that we become more familiar with that most mature, befuddling, and fruitful element of grammar: the question.

This is the only Christmas carol that begins with a question; and paired with this haunting melody it may be the most plaintive and beseeching of all the hymns we sing at Christmastime. In some ways, it is the most human of all the Christmas hymns we sing. Written by a man in the midst of a battle, there is a darkness around its edges. Look at the first line...”laid to rest” is a phrase more commonly used for burial than it is for a child in his mother’s arms.

But if we’ve chosen to enter into life at all, and if we’ve chosen to delve deeply into faith, we know that both are filled with paradoxes. One can both ask questions and be faithful at the same time; one can wonder and be confident all in the same moment; one can both seek the answer and know the answer all in the same breath.

There is a truth about Christmas worth reminding ourselves of. You know that there are Twelve Days of Christmas. But they aren’t the twelve days before Christmas, when we finish all our shopping. They are the twelve days after Christmas—the season of Christmas. We’re on day three. We keep a season of Christmas for many reasons, not the least of which is to be reminded that Christmas is not a moment, but an eternal truth. It is not just a once-a-year birthday, but the declaration that something beyond all hope and expectation has come true...that as John says, the Word of God has become flesh, expressly for the purpose of dwelling among us; and that it’s not just baby Jesus who is in that manger, but as William Chatterton Dix says, it is the silent Word, who already is pleading on our behalf.

The Great Church Fathers said this: “What is not assumed cannot be redeemed.” It was their fancy, ancient way of saying that for Easter to mean anything; for Christ truly to be the Savior; it was essential that he be human. Not partly human, not appearing to be human, but fully human...who lived like us, and was born like us; flesh, and blood, and bones; laughing, and weeping, and sighing; and eventually, dying...but only, in the end, to be raised that we, too, might be raised.

Which means that there is no place we can go where God hasn't already been. Not in the highest places are we alone, nor in the lowest; not in the brightest places, nor the darkest; not in the places of greatest faith, and nor in those places where we ask the most profound questions. When we stand on our own two feet, more confident in our own declarative sentences than we have a right to be, the Word made flesh is there. And when we lie in our bed, wondering what is left and capable only of a question, the Word made flesh is there, also--closer than a whisper, with the brightness and comfort of a flame that never is extinguished.

“What child is this?” Dix asks...he must have prayed this question scores of times before he dared write it down. but revealed to him, and revealed to us, is this: He is the Word made flesh, already pleading on our behalf.

We're all seekers; we're all a little bit like the shepherds or the wise men—yearning, and looking for something. We are all among the unfinished. There's nothing wrong with that. It's the way we are; it's part of being human; it's the way God made us; we are joyfully incomplete. It's why we sing “O come, o come Emmanuel” for all those weeks.

Well, he has; and he does; and he will. Because he is not just a baby born once, but the Word of the Father, now in flesh appearing.

So what we do is come, ourselves...come to the manger, come to the table, come to adore him, come to worship him...with all that we are and all that we have; with all our faith and with all our questions. “So bring him incense, gold, and myrrh” is how a comforted Dix finishes his carol. Do that if you like. But remember, the gift this baby most desires most, and gladly receives, is just ourselves.

Here the congregation sang “O Come, All Ye Faithful.”