

John 1:10-13
What Only Children Know
December 13, 2003
Shadyside Presbyterian Church

Those who enjoy Christmas the most are children. So if you really want to enter into the joy this season, you will have to become a child again - this time a child of God.

Sixty-six years before the birth of Christ, in an aristocratic neighborhood of Rome, a very important child was born. At his advent, a messenger raced into the Roman Senate and announced, "The next ruler of the world is born." His name was Octavius. He was destined to become the adopted son of Julius Caesar, and thus he grew up in the palace. He was educated by the finest teachers of literature, philosophy, and government. By the age of thirty-three he was the uncontested ruler of the Roman empire. As the greatest of all Caesars, the Senate gave him the name Emperor Augustus, meaning the exalted one, who reigned over the golden age of the empire. He just had to give the word and armies would march, ships would sail, and nations would fall. He just had to give the word and the world would move for him.

"In those days," the Christmas story begins, "a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered." It was during this census that another child was born, in a very unimportant neighborhood, in a very unimportant part of the empire. No Roman messengers ran to the Senate to announce his advent. Rather, it was God's own messengers, angels, who announced the birth of Jesus Christ to the least of the inhabitants of the empire - a small band of shepherds watching over their sheep.

This child began his life in a humble manger, because there was no room for him in the normal places. He was raised not in a palace, but in a common Jewish home. He was educated not in literature and philosophy, but in carpentry. And at the age of thirty-three he ascended not to the Roman throne, but to a Roman cross. As our text today tells us, "He was in the world, and the world came into being through him, yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him." (John 1:10-11) No we never did have much room for Jesus. That is because we have long focused our attention on the other child - the one who has the trappings of power. The Caesar at work, school, or at home; the Caesar of money, security, of health, who we think has the power over our lives. Caesar only has to say the word, and we start to hustle.

But what if it was the child in the manger, the one who became a carpenter, that really had the power to create our lives for us? And to create a life that is not just comfortable, but filled with eternal purpose and mission. What if he just had to give the word and salvation could break out all over the world? Or to put it more theologically, what if he was God's Word that brings good news of great joy for all people? What if we have spent our lives serving the wrong ruler?

It sounds naive, childish, to believe that the one born in a barn was destined to be the real ruler of the world. In fact, it sounds almost like a fairy tale. Almost. Except this is the most real thing the

church has to say this month. Jesus really is the Savior. But you do have to become a child again to believe this. “To all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave the power to become children of God.” (John 1:12)

There are some things that only children know - things that are critical to understanding Christmas. Which means that adults have to recover the ability to think like a child again in order to receive the Christmas miracle. But to do that you have dig past what we call reality, but is actually only cynicism, to find the wonder of being God’s child.

Children live in a world filled with mystery and possibilities. They believe it is possible to move from Kansas to Oz, or from a bedroom to Narnia. If they look down a hole, who knows what they will find? Perhaps a Wonderland is waiting below. In a child’s world reindeer can fly, snowmen can come to life, and a frog can turn into a prince - but you have to kiss him to find out. It’s all a part of living in a mystery filled world.

“Fine for children,” you say, “But let’s deal with reality. Reindeers can’t fly. Snowmen just melt. And after kissing a lot of frogs I still haven’t found my prince. So if I had to give up those stories when I became an adult, why should I believe in the one about Jesus?” Because this is the only story in your mystery-starved life that is true. And it is more true than all that stuff Caesar is telling you. Christmas isn’t just a lovely story about Mary and Joseph and a bunch of shepherds. It is also a depiction of the high drama of God’s interruptions of your life. Just as the Holy Spirit surprised Mary by conceiving salvation in her womb, so is that same Spirit intent on being at work within your life. Those are among the truest words you will hear all week. But to believe them, you will have to recover the child’s ability to wonder.

Children also have the ability to teach us another lesson about Christmas that we have forgotten. Get a child to start talking about this season and it will soon become evident that they believe Christmas is not about giving. It’s about receiving. And they are right about that. That’s why they love Christmas.

In all of my years of pastoral ministry I have never had a child schedule an appointment to talk to me about the stress of the Christmas holidays. They are not in a lather about how much they have to do for others. They don’t max out their credit cards, try to throw perfect parties, fret over the travel arrangements, or sigh under the burden of so many cards to get in the mail. No, the only thing children worry about when it comes to Christmas is if they can possibly wait for it to get here. The house is decorated, the tree is beautiful, and by Christmas, underneath it will be a present for them. Trust me they are clear about that.

When I was a child, it was about this time of the season that my father would set the minimum amount of money that my brothers and I were expected to spend on gifts for others in the family. That is because he was eager to correct the burgeoning materialism he sensed in his sons. Christmas, he would remind us is about giving. But as a pastor, I have discovered that this is a lesson we have over-learned. The way the story goes, God is the only one who is giving at Christmas. And what he is giving is himself, in Jesus Christ. The rest of us are receiving this grace, and rejoicing. Now I understand the value of giving gifts to our loved ones as a symbol of this grace, but never

forget what the symbols symbolize - that the world has received a new Savior-King who can transform us from greed to compassion.

Still another reason why you have to become a child again to understand Christmas, is because children expect to have a future. They have such wonderful dreams about what they want to do when they grow up. They are as of yet unencumbered by their limitations. The whole world stands before them as unexplored possibilities. But as adults we spend so much time managing the mistakes and sins of the past, making only more mistakes and sins, that we eventually doubt that anything good is coming in the future.

So many times I have heard someone speak of deep regret. "If only I can undo what I have done." "If only I had made different decisions about marriage." "If only I had not always chosen for the career." "If only I had spent more time with the kids while they were home." "If only I had taken better care of my health." "If only..."

The harsh reality is that we cannot return to our youth with a clean slate. Actually, under our own power we cannot even make our way back to being a child who is good at receiving or believing in mystery. After all we have seen and done over the years in our service to Caesar, it would take a miracle to become a child again. Right! That is why this time we have to be born, "not by blood or the will of flesh, or the will of man, but by God." (John 1:13)

How do we become new creations, born anew by God to an open future? Well, remember that being born is a rather passive process. The first time around none of us chose our birth. We didn't figure out the right theology or say the right prayer. The birth just happened to us as grace. In fact, it took quite a while before we even realized that we were born. The same thing is true of a spiritual rebirth. Again, it isn't something you achieve. It is a grace that you receive. "To all who received him," the coming Savior, "he gave the power to become children of God." Your life in Christ begins as Jesus' life - as a receiving child. It begins a child who receives the love of the Father.

You see the miracle of Christmas is not that our old mistakes are wiped away so we can start over. Thank God we don't have to start over, because we would just make the same mistakes again. No the miracle of Christmas is that in receiving a Savior you are changed, not into a baby, but into the beloved child of God.

That changes everything about you. For the perfect love of God casts out all fear, forgives and redeems your past, and frees you to turn your face to a future filled with hope and delicious mystery.

Come, O Savior, and be born in us, that we might be born anew. Come to us that our despair may be changed into your hope, our doubt into your faith, and our sin into your righteousness. Amen.

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