

## Becoming God's Child

[John 1:10-13](#)

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

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66 years before the birth of Christ, in an aristocratic community of Rome, a very important child was born. As soon as he arrived, a messenger raced into the Roman Senate and announced, "The next ruler of the world is born." His name was Octavius, and he was destined to become the adopted son of Julius Caesar. He grew up in the palace. He was educated by the finest teachers of literature, philosophy, and government. And at the age of 33 he was the uncontested ruler of the entire Roman empire. He just had to give the word and armies would march and ships would sail. He just had to give the word and the world would move for him. The Senate gave him the name Emperor Augustus, meaning the exalted one, who reigned over the golden age of the empire.

When he was about 66 years old, "In those days 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 village, in a very unimportant part of the empire. No Roman messengers ran to announce his birth to the Senate. Instead, it was God's own angelic messenger 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. "Do not be afraid; for see, I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord" (Luke 2:10-11).

This other 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 a common Jewish home. He was not educated in literature and philosophy, but in carpentry. And at age 33, he ascended not to the reign of the Roman empire, but to a Roman cross. "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 why we killed him. But in that ultimate act of sacrifice for the sins of a dark world, Jesus became the King of a whole new kingdom that has long outlived every empire.

To this very day, he just has to give the word and his salvation and hope can break into any life and any nation in the world. That is what we proclaim at Advent. This is a season of new beginnings and new hopes. In the words of the angel, Advent proclaims goods of great joy for all the people: for the kings and the shepherds, for those who feel left out of the joy and festivities of our holidays, for those who feel their golden era has come and gone, and for those who have enjoyed most every privilege the world has to offer but who still can't get their restless hearts to be satisfied. Most importantly of all, Advent proclaims good news for those who are seriously looking for a Savior.

Of course, we in church are quick to say that we do believe God is our Savior. In the Creed, we just affirmed our belief in the Father, the Son, and the Spirit. Yes, that is what we said. But now the question is, do we really believe it? Do you really believe God is the Savior of your children, your loneliness, your broken heart, your job, your failing health? Do you really believe that he can save the city of Washington or the fragile peace accords in the Middle East? Do you really believe he will forgive all your sins and save you from the relentless guilt that seems attached to the walls of your heart? Do believe he can do that? That is what it means to believe in a Savior.

Our text today claims that to find that kind of belief, you will have to become a child again. "To all who received him who believed in his name, he gave the power to become children of God" (John 1:12). So if you are to understand the real meaning of Christmas you will have to become a child.

For one, this is because children find belief easy. They live in a world filled with mystery and possibilities. They believe it is possible to move from Kansas to Oz or from the bedroom to Narnia. They can look down a hole and who knows? There could be a Wonderland below. In the children's world reindeer can fly, and snowmen can come to life. Some religious parents try to take all these stories away from children and teach just the Bible. But that is a great mistake. It is important that kids believe in a mystery-filled world if we are ever going to teach them about the mystery of God becoming flesh.

"Fine for children," you say, "But let's be grown ups. Reindeers can't fly. Snowmen just melt. They don't turn into anything but water. So if those mysteries weren't true, why should I believe in the story of Jesus?" Because it is the only story in your mystery-starved life that is still true. Because this is not just the story of Mary and Joseph and the shepherds, but it is also the high drama of God's interruptions of your life. Just as the Holy Spirit conceived salvation in Mary's life, so is he intent on saving you. Those are the truest words you are going to hear this week. But to believe them, you will have to recover the child's ability to wonder.

A second reason you have to become a child to understand Christmas, is because children know that Christmas is all about receiving. How many kids do you know who are talking right now about how stressed they are over the holidays? None! That's because children aren't worrying about how much they have to do for others. They don't max out their credit cards. They don't try to throw the perfect parties. They are not in a lather about the Christmas cards they have to mail. No, the only thing children worry about when it comes to Christmas is if can they possibly wait for it to get here. They know something wonderful is about to happen. The house is decorated. The tree is beautiful, and by Christmas it will have a present for them. Trust me, they're clear about that.

Children are very good at receiving. It is only as adults that we start to think that Christmas is all about giving. But according to the

Bible, there is only one giver at Christmas, and that is God Almighty who is giving us his only Son. Now, I understand the value of offering presents to our loved ones, but only if we see it as a very imperfect symbol of the greatest gift called salvation. Christmas is not about all the stuff you've got to do in the next two weeks. It is about receiving what God has already done in giving you a Savior. "To all who received him who believed in his name, he gave the power to become children of God."

A third reason why you have to become a child again to understand Christmas, is because children have a future. They have wonderful dreams about what they want to be. They are as of yet unencumbered by their limitations and failures. The world exists for them as unexplored possibilities. But as adults we spend so much time managing our mistakes and sins, making only more mistakes and sins, that we lose our ability to believe in the future. Our focus is only on the failures of the past.

Last Friday our president said, "I would give anything to go back and undo what I did. But one of the painful truths I have to live with is the reality that that is simply not possible." I have heard that said by others who have come to the pastor's study. I have heard it a lot. "If only I can undo what I did. But it is simply not possible." "If only I had not driven drunk." "If only I had spent more time with my children." "If only I had not said what I said. I would give anything to take it back. But it is not possible to undo what I did." No, it is not possible.

The harsh reality is that we can't make our way back to being that child with the clean slate. I'm not even sure that we can make our way back to being the child who is good at receiving, or who finds belief in mystery to be easy. After what we have seen, and done, it would take a miracle to become a child again. Right! That is why this time, we will 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 get born anew, by God? Well, remember, being born is a rather passive process. The first time around none of us chose to be born. We didn't figure out the right theology or say the right prayer in order to get born. It just happened to us, as a grace. In fact, it took quite a while before we even realized we were born. The same things are true about your spiritual birth. How will you know that you have been born of God? Again, "To all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave the power to become children of God."

It is hard for us to understand this phrase, "believe in his name." That is because we have a different understanding of names. For us a name is used to represent a person. If I were to say the name of your mother, you would immediately think of her. That name is conformed to her identity. But for the ancients, it was the person who was expected to conform to the name. That is why people keep having their names changed when they encounter God. When Simon's name was changed to Peter, the rock, Jesus expected him to grow into that new identity. Thus, for us to believe in the name of Jesus, the one who saves, means to grow into a whole new identity in him. After receiving this Savior who has come to us at Christmas, now it is no longer you who lives, but Christ who lives in you.

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. We would just make the same mistakes again. No, the miracle of Christmas is that in receiving a Savior you are changed! In becoming a child of God, we do not revert back to being babies again, but we take on the relationship of the Son to the Father.

That changes everything! You might as well take on a new name. How about "Christ-ian"? For now you are one who grows into the identity of the Savior who is with you, forgiving you, leading you, changing you, bringing you home to the Father who is waiting for you, his beloved child.

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

Amen .