
What Child is This?

A sermon by the Rt. Rev. Robert C. Wright
Christmas Eve – Year B

In the Name of the God, Blessed, Brilliant and Benevolent. Amen.

Good evening. Merry Christmas! I greet you in the Name of Jesus of Nazareth, the one whose birth we celebrate tonight. And I bring greetings on behalf of the Episcopal Church in Middle and North Georgia, all 110 worshipping communities.

What is Christmas anyway? That's the question I asked a group of three year olds I ran into the other day. You won't be surprised by their answers. Christmas is presents, one child said. Christmas is lights. Christmas is family. Those were all good answers.

If you asked me that question—What is Christmas?— I would add one more thing to the list: Christmas is music. What would Christmas be without music and singing? *O Come All ye faithful, Joyful and Triumphant, come all ye citizens of Bethlehem.* Or, *Silent Night, Holy Night, all is calm all is bright.* Or, Augusta, Georgia's own James Brown's contribution to Christmas music, "*Santa Claus go straight to the ghetto, hitch up your reindeer and go straight to the ghetto.*"

What child is this?

But the hymn that's touched me anew this year is "What Child Is This?" Do you remember that one? "*What child is this, who, laid to rest On Mary's lap is sleeping? Whom angels greet with anthems sweet, while shepherds watch are keeping?*" It was written by an English insurance executive, William Chatterton Dix, the year our Civil War ended. He had been deathly ill and confined to his sick bed for months. And still, in his sickness, in his depression, words of adoration and hope came through him to the world, and down to us. "What child is this?" was his question.

And what child is this who we celebrate tonight? I think Jesus is an inconvenient child. Look at the timing of his birth. He comes before the wedding. He comes before Joseph can get his head around what's happening. He comes pushing and kicking as Mary rides her donkey. He comes despite a hostile political climate and a war on poor people. Jesus is an inconvenient child. He doesn't come to affirm the status quo. He comes to trouble it. To rewrite it. He's an inconvenience to religious people. He doesn't come to the temple first. The breaking news of his birth goes to the field first. I wonder what that says about the church? He's inconvenient for high society. His mother is not from one of the leading families of Nazareth. No pedigree. And Joseph was a day laborer like the men we see in front of Lowe's and Home Depot nowadays. I wonder what that says about us who strive and jockey for social status. What child is this? There's no two ways about it, this special child comes to nobodies in a barn on the outskirts of town. Which of course kind of calls into question all of the pageantry and excess the world puts on tonight.

But what does this inconvenient child want from *us*? I think part of the answer is room. Space. As in "...let every heart prepare him room ... then heaven and nature can sing ...". At every real life decision. With all that we are and all that we have. At every intersection in our personal and professional relationships, you and I have a choice to make. We can say the words of the innkeeper in the Christmas story, "Sorry, there is no room here." Or, we can choose to say what Joseph said, "I don't understand, God. I had other plans, God. But I will trust you, God." Or, we can say what Mary said, "Let it be unto me according to God's word." Which is just a fancy way of saying, I don't mind being inconvenienced by you God. That's a

good definition for what it means to have faith: Faith is the willingness to be regularly inconvenienced by God. I wonder just how many teenage girls in Nazareth the angel Gabriel approached before Mary said, "Inconvenience me, God." Change my existence into life. Of all the trouble in the world, God, I want your brand of trouble. Redirect me. When you get right down to it, Christmas is about us gifting ourselves to God in thanksgiving for the gift of God's inconvenient child.

A gathering child

What child is this? He is a gathering child! All because of Jesus, heaven and earth come together in a pasture in Palestine. The suburb and the big city shake hands. Light and darkness intertwine. Shepherds and heavenly host cohabitate. And an angel conducts a choir for an audience of sheep. This child is a gathering child. He brings together what looks like disparate and disconnected things. He sees the interconnectedness of everything.

But to gather the shepherd and the wise men, the believer and non-believer, sinners and saints, there has to be a pre-existing bigness. A bigness not designed by us. A unique bigness that is God's gift to us. Big gatherings need big rooms. Maybe that's why Jesus' birth announcement happened outdoors. And big movements need big messages. Did you hear the angel's message? "*Do not be afraid; for see, I am bringing you good news of great joy for all people ...*" Can you even imagine good news big enough to gather *all* people? What would it be? What good news is big enough to gather Rush Limbaugh and Rachel Maddow? Or the people of Ferguson, Missouri, together with their police department? Or, Eric Garner's wife together with the man that choked her husband to death? Or the slain NYPD officers' families with the mother of the man who killed them? Or, right here in Georgia. What divine good news is big enough to gather our own governor, together with the mothers of Marcus Wellons and Robert Wayne Holsey, the two men he allowed to be executed by lethal injection this year?

The only good news that is big enough to hold all of us together, the only good news that could cause joy and make it spread, is the good news of human dignity. The good news that each of us is bundled from our creation with irreducible, indelible, incalculable worth. That somehow we are more valuable than the sum total of our accomplishments. Somehow we are more valuable than the sum total of our failures. All of us. Each of us. On this night, two-thousand years ago, our big God gathered God's Self into flesh. And by that sublime act, God reminds us that all human flesh is holy. That every human being has a godly inner engraving that is easier to see with our hearts than with our eyes. But the power of each of us affirming the dignity of every human being creates all the conditions for mutual growth and development.

Human dignity is the only star bright enough to guide us through the conversation about race in America. Human dignity is the only star bright enough to compel us to really care for our veterans. The only star bright enough to empower to us to finally end capital punishment in Georgia and the world.

What child is this? He is born gathering us and in 33 years he will die with his arms outstretched to the world. He was born being serenaded by angels but will die listening to the pleas of a criminal. If this gathering commemorates anything tonight, it commemorates the birthday of a bigness that confronts our smallness. A bigness that would gather us, adopt us, and go home with us.

I know what you're thinking. If all of this is true, why does the world look the way it does? What can really change? And we know the answer. Nothing changes if we keep doing what we have always done.

But there's an amazing thing about God here. If we would be inconvenienced by this child and let this baby gather us and make us big in spirit, God will take the cynical question marks at the end of our sad sentences and straighten them into triumphant exclamation points. That's what happened to William Chatterton Dix on his sickbed 149 years ago.

A contagious brilliance

"What child is this?" he asked and then he answered his own question: "This, this is Christ the King ... This is the King whom salvation brings. This is the silent Word pleading." Does it change your heart any to know that the King of All Creation, the Lord of the Universe, by the act of Christmas is pleading with the world, and with us, to know His Glory. That is, to know what real light is. Some people believe that the prevalence of darkness is proof that light is inferior. And so they don't dare hope. But they're wrong. Darkness is the precondition for light to shine. Tonight we sing about a brilliant

child who would call brilliance out of each of us. And when you see God's light show, you want to *be* God's lightshow. Jesus' brilliance is contagious.

What the future holds none of us can know. How will we adapt to meet our present challenges is not entirely clear. But what is clear for us is that "Jesus is the same, yesterday, today and forever." "That nothing shall separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus." That every generation thinks its burdens are the heaviest. But that the children of light in every age have made the difference. Christmas is the vertical assurance that gives us horizontal endurance!

What a compliment you and I have been paid, to be included in God's mission to the world, to light up the darkness. To eradicate the indifference. Right here, right now.

What gives our lives their shimmer? Why do we rejoice! Because with songwriter Dix and Mary and the shepherds that night we also know that Jesus is worth all the trouble!

Because in Him, there is still help for the helpless. There is hope for the hopeless. There is life for the lifeless. God is a friend to the friendless. He can mend your broken pieces, cause you to live and be blessed.

What child is this? This, this is Christ the King, that shepherds guard and angels sing. Joy, joy for Christ is Born, the Babe the Son of Mary.