

The Feast of the Nativity C - Christmas Day - 25 December 2009

Isaiah 9:2-7; Titus 2:11-14; Luke 2:1-20

Jim Stockton

I love what author Frederick Buechner has written about this day. "The claim that Christianity makes for Christmas," he says, "is that at a particular time and place, God came to be with us Himself. When Quirinius was governor of Syria," he goes on, "in a town called Bethlehem, a child was born, who, beyond the power of anyone to account for, was the high and lofty One made low and helpless."

Of the many things people love about Christmas, I believe that one of them is this: Christmas says that God became not just human, not just a person, a man of Galilee. Christmas says that God became a baby, and people still love this. It is in this that people can come to understand the significance of Christmas, the real miracle beyond the obvious, and know what really happened on that first Noel.

Since I was first a father, and I mean here a parent, not a priest, I have enjoyed reading to my daughters the story of little boy and a particular Christmas in his life. Charlie and his family are enjoying some snowy weather, and on their walk back home they pass by Mr. Wilson's house. Charlie can't help but notice that Mr. Wilson's house is without decoration. There are no lights on the roof, no tree in the front window, no wreath on the door. Charlie's mom and dad explain to him: Mr. Wilson hasn't decorated these last few years, now, not since Mrs. Wilson passed away.

Back home, Charlie is helping his father set up the Christmas tree. Charlie has an idea. "Dad," says Charlie, "Could I have these extra branches?" "Sure," says Dad. And while Dad finishes setting up the tree, Charlie fashions a small wreath from the branches. He finds a couple small ornaments and a bow, and attaches them to it. "I'll be back in a little while," Charlie announces. He takes the wreath and walks down the street. Carefully, he makes his way to Mr. Wilson's front door. He knocks, and knocks again. There is no answer, so Charlie leaves the wreath on the porch leaning against the door.

Later that day, Charlie is outside playing with some friends. When they're finished and he is walking back home, Charlie passes in the direction of Mr. Wilson's house and can't help but notice the wreath that he made hanging on the door.

This story reminds me that part of the manifold magic of Christmas is that the story of the Christ child renews the child within nearly everyone. In the blur of the shopping blitz, through the series of parties, and the worn out checklist of things to do, Christmas still gives birth in many to a childlike faith in the goodness of God. And, at least for a while, it brings that faith to life in their world today. Beyond the harder realities of most of the year, beyond the year's discouragement and disappointment, and the impatience, anger, and despair that these breed, comes this soft and gentle reminder of innocence; of hope, of peace, of joy, of love; of ideals and inspiration and a renewed belief that these still matter.

The next day, Charlie is helping his mother wrap up some cookies, freshly baked, to give to family who are coming by tomorrow. "Mom," he says, "would it be all right if I took these extra cookies over to Mr. Wilson?" Charlie wraps them up nicely and adds a bow. At Mr. Wilson's door, he knocks, and then knocks again. The door opens just a bit, and Charlie can see Mr. Wilson looking down at him. "Hi," says Charlie, "these are just for you, Mr. Wilson. Merry Christmas," Mr. Wilson says nothing, at first. Then he opens the door, and leans down with a nervous smile. "Well, thank you, Charlie," he says. "Thank you, very much."

The world may have to wait each year for Christmas, but at least then, the good news does break in again. People are reminded that they can and do care about one another, that people can and do help one another, that love, given hands and hearts and lives, really can and really does make the biggest difference of all. Not in power but in Love, not in riches but in Love - not in anger, threat, and conquest, but in Love - has God come into this imperfect world.

As Frederick Buechner goes on to say: "The One who inhabits eternity comes to dwell in time. "The One whom none can look upon and live is delivered in a stable under the soft indifferent gaze of cattle. The Father of all mercies puts Himself at our mercy." When people remember the miracle that we celebrate today, they remember that the Almighty and Everlasting, the Ruler of the universe, entrusted the very presence of God's own being to the fragile form of a helpless baby; and became completely subject to the fragility of human care.

With nothing more than the love of a baby for his mother, nothing more than the love of a mother for her child, nothing less than God's Love for all has come. And by this, I think, Christmas touches in them, in each of us, the child that never surrenders to maturity, who before he or she ever even learns them by name, and long before she or he ever learns to doubt them, understands meaning of peace, good will to all.

The next day finds Charlie playing outside, and on his way back home to get ready for Christmas Eve services, he passes by the direction of Mr. Wilson's house. He sees again the wreath he made hanging on the door, and he can't help but notice that a small Christmas tree setting on a table is now visible through Mr. Wilson's front window. Then he notices some noise coming from Mr. Wilson's garage. Charlie hears the sound of a hammer, and the sound of a saw, and Charlie can only wonder at what is going on.

When you and I in wonder gaze in our mind's eye, with the eyes of childlike faith, upon the infant Jesus, God is touching the best within us and raising up the unrelenting child that God has birthed in each of us. It is God saying to us, "Here is my Joy to you and to all the world. More than anything else, I long for you to come near to me and near to one another as people, as my family. And so I come near to you, so that as I give my Love to you, you may find your love for me."

It's then that you and I understand again that in the birth of the infant Jesus, God comes 'down to us,' so to speak, in order to lift us up to God. God brings heaven near to us so we may come near to heaven. God tells us, in effect, "I want you to trust me; and so, I will begin by

trusting you. I trust you to care for me among you; I believe in you in me." And we understand that before God ever asks you or me to believe in Jesus Christ, it is in infant Christ Jesus that God first believes in us.

Christmas morning arrives and Charlie wakes to a happy morning of giving and receiving and of taking a moment to thank God for it all. Then, unexpectedly, there comes a knock at the door. Dad answers, and to everyone's surprise, in walks Santa Claus. "I understand that a very good little boy lives here," says Santa, "and I have something here for him." "Charlie?" says Santa, and Charlie comes near. Santa reaches into a sack that he is carrying. "This is for you," he says, and he pulls out a small wooden sled, just the right size for Charlie. It's varnished and shiny and beautifully carved. And Charlie's name is painted on it carefully, wonderfully.

"It's just for you, Charlie," Santa says, "Merry Christmas!" Walking back out the front door, Santa wishes a Merry Christmas to all. Charlie can't help but notice that there's something about Santa that is familiar to him. Santa walks down the street in the same direction as Mr. Wilson's house. "Merry Christmas, Santa!" Charlie calls after him. Santa turns and smiles. "It certainly is, Charlie" he calls back; "It certainly is."

In the child born in Bethlehem, and in that child born in you, born in me, God brings forward our most god-like quality of all: the desire to love and to be loved. Somehow through Christmas, God replaces our adulthood's prudence, with our childlike generosity instead. God replaces our realistic resignation toward how things simply are with our most idealistic hope for what we can bring to be. And all over again, we remember: this is the thing that we just love about Christmas.

And so may God, who wonderfully created us, and more wonderfully restores the dignity of human nature, grant that we may share the divine life of the One who humbly shares in our humanity, Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.