



## SERMONS THAT WORK

### Christmas Day Selection I

#### Becoming Children Again

[RCL]: Isaiah 9:2-7; Psalm 96; Titus 2:11-14; Luke 2:1-14(15-20)

Christmas is always better with children around. There is something in their excitement, their wonder, their anticipation for treats and presents that brings as much joy to the giver as to the recipient. As the old joke goes, “There are three stages of life: We believe in Santa Claus, we become Santa Claus, and we look like Santa Claus.” Becoming Santa Claus—giving presents to excited children—is the greatest joy of all. It is the great secret of Christmas that we discover as we leave childhood—and yet, we can still remember our childlike wonder and excitement. We may even still miss having those intense feelings of anticipation and wonder.

Christmas can also be a time when we feel the absence of children or loved ones most severely and painfully. The first Christmas after a death or divorce can fill us with intense sadness and grief. Even in our laughter and joy, feelings of unease lie beneath, and we realize we are not children anymore.

The angel tells the shepherds on that first Christmas: “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. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.”

The first word of Christmas to humans was “Do not be afraid.” The shepherds’ dark night sky was split open by blinding light, so the reason they were afraid is obvious to us, but these words, “Do not be afraid,” are words for us, too. C.S. Lewis wrote about the death of his wife, Joy, with these words: “No one ever told me that grief felt so like fear. I am not afraid, but the sensation is like being afraid. The same fluttering in the stomach, the same restlessness, the yawning. I keep on swallowing.”

Is it because our expectations for a perfect Christmas are so high we often feel grief and fear with such intensity at this time of year? If we find this to be true, then the angel’s words, “Do not be afraid,” are words for us.

The reason the angel gives for our fearlessness is that a Savior is born to us this day. The world Jesus was born into was full of problems and turmoil. The weight of the Roman occupation was felt by everyone, including these shepherds, and the lingering trauma of the Babylonian captivity made it difficult for most people to see much hope. And every Christmas since the first one has happened in the shadow of war, famine, occupation, and uncertainty. Every Christmas since the first one has happened in a world where children have gone hungry and been abused and neglected. There has never been a perfect Christmas. Jesus is always born into a world that is fearful and anxious.

The hope of Christmas does not lie in our creating “the perfect Christmas.” The hope of Christmas lies in a manger, wrapped in swaddling clothes. The hope of Christmas is a person—and a tiny person, at that. This tiny person, born in Bethlehem, is the reason we no longer have to be afraid. No matter what grief, fear, or anxiety we may feel during this Christmas season, there is hope for us in this baby from Bethlehem.

The reason we find hope in this baby goes back to the ancient prophecies we read in Isaiah and other Old Testament passages of Holy Scripture. The prophets foretold that an anointed one, or “Messiah” would deliver God’s people from oppression and subjugation. The birth of Jesus in Bethlehem is the way in which these prophecies are fulfilled.

In our Isaiah reading, we are told this Messiah will be called, “Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.” These are titles that speak to how Jesus helps us today. We are all in need of counsel as we face the difficult decisions and challenges of life. This baby born in Bethlehem can be your Wonderful Counselor.

We are often faced with our own powerlessness. We are powerless to change other people and we are often powerless to change our circumstances. This baby born in Bethlehem can be your Mighty God, able to do things you cannot do.

The changes and chances of life cause us anxiety. We face uncertainty in our personal lives and in our larger communities. This baby born in Bethlehem can show you the Everlasting Father.

When we look at the wars, oppression, and conflicts between nations, family members, and people groups, it is easy to give up hope for any peace. But this baby born in Bethlehem can be your Prince of Peace.

2,000 years later, we know this is true. We know this baby born in Bethlehem grows up to preach and teach and heal. We know this baby born in Bethlehem grows up and stretches out his arms on the hard wood of the cross so that everyone can come into the reach of his saving embrace. We can see him in his birth, in his life, and in his death, and we can see him in his resurrection. His whole life speaks to the redeeming power of God to provide the ultimate answer to our world’s *dis-ease* and pain.

But on that night so long ago, these shepherds only knew what they had been told by the angel. They knew so little, but their hope was strong. So, they went “with haste” to see this baby in the manger. This is the faith of Christmas: to hear good news and run to meet it.

Ethiopian Christians play a game called “Genna” on Christmas. It’s a version of field hockey, played with a hockey stick and a wooden ball, all hand-carved from eucalyptus wood. The origins of the game go back to the Christmas when the Ethiopian shepherds heard the news of Jesus’ birth. The story goes that when they heard the news, they were so overjoyed that they broke out into a field hockey game!

Luke’s account of the shepherds’ excitement and dash into Bethlehem and the Ethiopian account of a jubilant hockey game both point to childlike exuberance. This is the energy of Christmas—childlike excitement at the news of this birth.

Christmas is always better with children around. And perhaps this Christmas, we can become children again—perhaps we can become childlike in our wonder when we see that God has become one of us in the person of Jesus Christ, this baby in the manger. Amen.

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