

Christmas Eve, December 24, 2010, Liturgical Year "A"
ST. BARTHOLOMEW'S ANGLICAN CHURCH IN THE TOWN OF TONAWANDA, NY
The Rev. Fr. Arthur W. Ward, Jr. + Rector

"There Can Be No Christmas without a Holy Family"

MERRY CHRISTMAS!

We gather together for yet another Christmas Celebration. This is the 16th Christmas I have been with St. Bartholomew's and this is our third in our new location. Hard to believe how time flies.

If you were with us that last two years you may recall that I preached on the truth of Christmas in 08, and last year how Christmas is only the beginning – that is the start to the life of faith – we have talked about how the spirit of Christmas is a spirit of worship and how the Christmas message is one to be proclaimed, the wonder of the Incarnation, **but tonight I want us to something that is overlooked. And that is this: there can be no Christmas without a holy family. What is at the heart of the Christmas account - the nativity scene. We have one out front and we have one on the round table in the Fr. Amend Hall.**

Have you ever wondered why God came to us as a baby born to a earthly father and an earthly mother? It is very profound when you reflect upon it. Mary and Joseph, and the baby Jesus. Mom, Dad and a child. No other religion has this imagery as its core message. Islam family is important but there is no nativity scene or event. Eastern religion it is the quest to separate yourself from your passions and the material world and after a series of deaths and rebirths once you get it right you are then achieve nirvana and are absorbed into the universe. So the family takes a lesser role and as a result to balance this extreme emphasis on the individual you find ancestor worship prevalent in the Far East.

But with the Christian faith, family is at the core? Why? It is the foundation for life.

Now we need to realize that God doesn't do anything by accident. There is a purpose to everything God does. And this is certainly true when it comes to the nativity of the Lord! Here is a reason. He wants to send the world a message. He wants to send us a message.

LIFE IS A GIFT FROM GOD

Life is a gift from God. It originates from God. Each person is made in God's image and has purpose in God's eyes. Everyone. God made Adam from the dust of the earth. God made Eve out of Adam. God said go and multiply – bear children, explore and enjoy the world I have given you, grow in your relationship with one another and with me. And even after the fall, God made this promise in **Genesis 3:15. *The seed of the woman will crush the head of the serpent.*** In other words, the child is going to save the parents.

Now what is so fascinating about this prophecy is that normally in the Scriptures it is the seed of the man and the bloodline is set forth through the fathers. But here it is the woman. Why? It is a prophecy of the virgin birth. No human male is involved in the conception of the son. In other words, the child is going to save the parents.

Life is a gift. Eternal life is a gift. **John 3:16: God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.**

LIFE IS ALL ABOUT RELATIONSHIPS

Life is all about relationships. We were not created to be alone or isolated.

You know during World War 2, during the height of the nightly air raids by the German Air Force, many children were taken to the countryside. And a strange phenomenon began to occur among newborns. Their heads would grow but not their bodies. Great Britain babies large heads, they started holding those babies and the problem ended.

But we don't need just physical contact we need emotional contact. God is saying that healthy relationships are fundamental to life. And its relationships that make a family strong. Psychologists have found that people need three things in life to succeed. They need someone to love and be loved by someone, something to do, and something to look forward to. And it's relationships that provide the foundation for such things.

THE FAMILY IS THE FOUNDATION FOR LIFE

By coming as a child, God is also saying that family is His idea. He created us male and female. You know men and women are different - physically, emotionally, psychologically. And rather be in competition to one another God made us to compliment one another. And God made us different that He might make us one. Could you imagine a world just full of men – what a mess? But ladies don't laugh – your weird too. And a planet just full of women? Oh my goodness. God made us different that He might make us one. He made us so that we can learn from one another and compliment one another.

And so when God comes in the midst of a mother and a father – He is affirming marriage, he is affirming family, and He is affirming that that is the best context to raise a child. There is no substitute. Oh yes, one can still be raised in different context. God doesn't love you any less – no one is illegitimate in God's eyes - but that is not God's design that is not His plan, that is the result of the fall, of human sin – plan and simple. Someone somewhere blew it – not God.

GOD IS PRO-LIFE AND WE ARE TO BE ALSO

It also tells us that God is not just the author of life but He is for the procreation of life. Men and Women are created to have children. And if you can't physically I believe you work to adopt. Now it isn't always God's will for everyone to have children – some are not given that capacity – some are not given that choice – whether physically, or circumstantially. But the call is still there for those who can. It is interesting that as we have gotten more materially comfortable in our Western Society, the child birth rate has plummeted. Why because of the emphasis on self and self-comfort. For a family to work you can't be selfish. To raise up children the way they should be raised you can't just think of yourself. It won't work. The Bible says children are a blessing from God and there is no greater responsibility that one can have than to raise up boys and girls made in the image of God to provide a loving and secure environment so that they can fulfill their God-given destiny.

HUMILITY IS THE KEY TO BUILDING A STRONG FAMILY

God gave us that model in Himself, didn't He. **Philippians 2:5-7: *Christ Jesus, who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross***

God could have made a grand entrance, but He didn't. That's how the Greeks and the Romans portrayed their man-gods – a grand entrance. Moslems don't believe Allah could ever do such a thing because that would be beneath Him. But not the God of the Bible. He came us a baby born to poor parents who could not even find a place to take them him but gave birth to the Lord in a stable or cave! Unbelievable – but the message is clear. Humility, selflessness, service unto others - that is what makes a person great it is what makes a family great. Jesus said, ***"Whoever wished to be great in the Kingdom of God must be servant of all." "He who exalts himself will be humbled but He who humbles himself will be exalted."***

The strong family is the one with people who aren't full of themselves, aren't only thinking of themselves, aren't just worried about themselves. The strong family is the family that builds each other up, that helps each other, that takes care of each other, that forgives each other. That my friends is the strong family and the one that Christ calls us to be.

THE EARTHLY FAMILY REFLECTS THE NATURE OF GOD

Let me just say also the earthly family is set up to reflect the nature of God. Did you ever think about that? God is a relational being. Yahweh revealed Himself not just as the Great I AM but that He exists as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. What we call the Trinity. He is One in essence but three persons. You say I can't understand it – of course you can't you are limited to 4 space time dimensions. God is not. Though Fire and Water are good analogies. Fire - the flame the heat and the light. Water H₂O - solid, liquid, vapor. .

God is a relational God not just one monolithic being as the Moslems believe or cosmic force as viewed in Eastern religion. No, He is relational and a three-fold relationship provides the perfect balance. You see if you have only two they can be obsessed with the other but not so with three. When there is three you can't just focus on one you have to always the other and vice versa if there is going to be harmony in the relationship.

WE ARE PART OF A HEAVENLY FAMILY - THE BODY OF CHRIST

And I will tell you something else. We have a beginning in the context of a family and we will end in the context of family but not just are earthly family – our church family – the family of God , the family of heaven.

God has brought us into a new family with the new bloodline a royal bloodline that of Jesus Christ! Aren't you glad you know have a royal bloodline of an everlasting king who is just and merciful, who is loving and all powerful. And we are His Body. We are the Body of Christ and the Family of God. And our purpose is to work, together worship together, pray together, have fun together, enjoy the Lord and His creation together. That is our purpose. And it begins when we put our faith in Jesus Christ. And it continues each and every day as we seek to build relationships.

Don't be a lone ranger? Don't think you don't need anybody else and that you can go it alone. Or your family can go it alone. Christmas teaches us otherwise.

CHRIST MUST BE AT THE CENTER OF ALL OUR RELATIONSHIPS

In fact, the final thing that Christ coming the way He teaches us is this and it is most important. When parents give birth to a child, their lives are turned upside down - in a good way. But now the baby becomes the focal point of their life. They have to care for the child 24/7. The baby is at the center of their relationship. In the same way Christ needs to be in the center of our lives and relationships. And that is why Christmas is such a good time to recommit your life to Jesus Christ? Christmas is a time to recommit your life to His Body the Church. If not on Christmas then when? What we see outside in the streets, in the highways and byways is not really Christmas. That is just excess and

The true Christmas begins here - worship Jesus the Son of God; praising him with fellow brothers and sisters in Christ - the family of God and then going and letting His light shine so that people might be drawn to Him and experience life as it is meant to be.

WILL YOU FOLLOW?

And so I ask you, will you make that commitment tonight? There is no better time. That you will follow Christ for the rest of your life. Our days are numbered. The Bible teaches over and over again, that time is short. We are living in a world that can't give us true peace, or lasting life. All that we see is passing away.

But it is what we do in the context of family makes all the difference.

The truth is we are not here because of some cosmic accident. We are not here because out of nothing came something and then the something becomes nothing. Not at all. We are here because the God of the universe put us here. And He tells us that everything counts.

The truth is we are in a battle. Do you remember what happened to the parents, Mary and Joseph? They were warned in a dream not to go back home but to spend time in Egypt because Herod wanted to kill Jesus. How did they survive. They listened to the Angel. They listened to God.

That is how we are going to survive and make it through. And God tells us to let our light shine, don't hide it under a bushel.

Noah a neighbor of ours and a friend of my son, is a freshmen at Niagara Wheatfield High School. He is a member of the Bible club there and they all decided to put Christmas messages on their lockers. He decided to make a cross and wrote Merry Christmas! on it with words of **Isaiah 9:6,7** written out:

For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor,^b Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the Lord Almighty will accomplish this.

The next morning he found the cross ripped up in pieces on the floor. Since Christmas is no longer endorsed by our government or schools it gives license for those who are offended by it to express their disdain for it.

Do you know what I told Noah? I said put up another sign. And keep putting them up. He ended up putting another a piece of paper that had John 3:16 quoted on it with Merry Christmas. That one has stayed up.

The point is we are called to let our light shine. We are called to shout it from the rooftops. We are called to live our lives for Jesus Christ so people can see that there not only is a difference but that there is a family that they can be a part of that transcends this world of ours.

That my friends is what really matters. It is at the heart of the Christmas message. Let us pray....