

Christmas Eve, December 24, 2006, Liturgical Year "C"

**ST. BARTHOLOMEW'S CHURCH IN THE TOWN OF TONAWANDA, NY**

The Rev. Fr. Arthur W. Ward, Jr. + Rector

***"Christmas Faith: It's More than a Wish!"***

**MERRY CHRISTMAS!**

I would like to welcome everyone to St. Bartholomew's and once again, "Merry Christmas!" We are gathered together this evening to celebrate God intercepting time and space and God becoming human flesh. For over 2000 years, it's a truth that has impacted the lives of untold billions in our world and it's a truth that has changed the course of human history.

**FAITH IS THE KEY**

The babe in the manger was good news then, and it is good news today. But the babe in the manger also grew up. The babe became a man, and the man Jesus said these profound words when he walked the earth. He said, "***When the Son of Man returns, will He find faith on the earth?***" (Lk. 18:8). Now there are two important points to that one statement. **First, Jesus is coming back to planet earth** – mark it down big bold plain and straight. Jesus is returning. **Second, when He returns will there still be faith on the earth?** It's a good question. In fact, I believe Jesus is asking if he were to come back today, would He find faith in us?

The Bible says in **Hebrews 11:6a** that "***without faith it is impossible to please God.***" Faith is the starting point. We won't even get to first base concerning the things of God if we don't have faith. And during Christmas, faith is essential to understanding the message of Christ. Now what does it mean to have faith? Why is faith so important?

Please turn in your pew Bibles to **Hebrews 11:1-3**. The Bible tells us: "***Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for the conviction of things not seen.*** In other words, it is being sure of what you are looking forward to in the future, and it is being convinced of something even though you do not see it. That is faith. The writer of **Hebrews** continues, "***Indeed by faith, our fathers received approval. By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible.***"

**CHRISTMAS FAITH IS A FAITH THAT BELIEVES**

And notice at the heart of faith is belief. **Heb. 11:6b** "***for whoever would approach God must believe that He exists and is a rewarder of those who seek Him.***" Christmas faith is a faith that believes. Studies have shown children have a natural predisposition to believing in God. They normally have no problem believing in another world separate from the visible natural world. We also know that from a young age children have a basic understanding of right from wrong. We call this our conscience

It is these two innate qualities, (among other things) that distinguish us from the animal kingdom.

So it shouldn't surprise us that Jesus said in **Mark. 10:16**, "***Whoever does not receive the Kingdom of God as a little child shall by no means enter it.***" Little children believe. Christmas faith is a faith that believes in a personal God (note the personal pronouns used for God in Hebrews 11:6b and that He rewards those who seek Him.). But it is more than just a faith that believes. The Bible tells us that even the demons believe! "***You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe and shudder.***" (James 2:19)

### **CHRISTMAS FAITH IS A FAITH THAT TRUSTS**

A Christmas faith is not only a faith that believes **it's a faith that trusts**. It is trusting in what you believe. In other words, it's more than an intellectual belief or recognition of something. When we trust someone or something we not only believe it is true, but we act on that belief. If a child is on a high ledge and his or her mom and dad says "jump" and they will catch them, the child will jump because the child trusts mom or dad. The child can't see ahead of time if he or she will be caught, but the child steps out in faith, trusting his or her parents and jumps.

They can't see whether or not what their parents say is true, but because they trust their parents, they make the choice and they act on their belief. Thus, again children show us how to approach Jesus: **with wide-eyed belief and unquestioning trust.**

I am reminded of the popular animated film of two years ago, *The Polar Express*. Based on the book by Chris Van Allsburg, *The Polar Express* takes us on one boy's journey from doubt to belief. You may recall that in the movie, the young boy struggles with his belief in Santa Claus. He lies in bed on Christmas Eve, hoping to hear the bells on Santa's sleigh, but his doubt grows. Later, he is awakened by the loud and surprising arrival of a train in his front yard. Walking outside, the boy is greeted by a conductor, who asks, "Well, are you coming?"

Boarding the train, we find, is the most important decision he makes. Along with many other children, the boy travels to the North Pole, where Santa will present the first gift of Christmas. During the trip, the boy continues to struggle with doubt, at one point trying to wake himself up. But in the end, the boy realizes that you first have to believe in order to see.

Later towards the end of the movie, the conductor says to the boy, "*It doesn't matter where you're going; what matters is deciding to get on.*" The choice of getting on, the decision to trust, once you believe. Life is a journey and the Lord wants us to get on his train. The Lord wants us to trust Him.

Too often we can allow life's disappointments to make us cynical. Too often we expect to get something for our faith and when we don't we feel let down by God. But life doesn't usually work out according to our plans. What's important isn't where we want to go or what we get, but that we trust God enough to follow Him. And when we are talking about the Lord Jesus Christ, we are not talking about mythology, bedtime stories, or Santa Clause. We are talking about ultimate reality, ultimate truth.

Something else the conductor says to the boy - "*The most real things in the world are the things we can't see.*" The Bible says in **2 Cor. 4:16-17**, "***We don't look to the things that are seen, for the things that are seen are passing away, but we look to the things that are unseen, for the things that are unseen are eternal.***"

Faith is trusting in what we can't see. It's real, but it hasn't been fully realized yet. For example, we can't see our future, but we make plans today based on the future we cannot see.

### **CHRISTMAS FAITH IS A FAITH THAT WORKS**

But Christmas faith is not only a faith that believes and a faith that trusts, **it's a faith that works**. Christmas faith impacts lives. There is life transformation, family transformation, community transformation, world transformation.

Jesus said, "You will know people and their ideas by their fruit." Just as you can tell whether a tree is good or bad by the fruit it produces it is no different with people and ideas. In other words, how does it impact life? We can see by the effects. We can tell by how lives are lived and changed.

And we can see the fruit in the lives most directly affected by the birth of Jesus Christ. **Mary** could have been overwhelmed with worry and anxiety in knowing that she was to bare God's Son, but she trusted in God, she acted on her faith and took care of Jesus from the very beginning. **Joseph** could have been concerned with his reputation and put Mary away after hearing about her being pregnant. But Joseph acted on his faith that God would take care of him, and he likewise, took care of Mary and his family. **The shepherds** acted on their faith by leaving their herds and then telling others after they had seen the baby Jesus. The **magi** ("wise men") acted on their faith to leave Persia to travel to Jerusalem to find the Christ child. All four acted on their faith. They could have ignored the signs. They could have ignored the message. They could have gone their merry way. But they didn't. They acted on their faith and they kept trusting! And their lives were changed. A faith that works is a faith that keeps trusting.

We can't see Jesus physically but we can see the effects of His power, love, and life. We can still see and hear His teachings, we can still see and hear His warnings, and we can still see and hear His miracles, His death and His resurrection. And we can live our lives accordingly. Jesus said, "***Whoever hears my words and acts upon them is***

***like a wise man who built His house on the rock and when the storms came – the rain, the winds and the floods beat upon that house, but it did not fall, because it had been built on the Rock.” (Mt. 7:24, 25).***

Christmas faith is a faith that believes, it's a faith that trusts and it's a faith that works. A faith that seeks to work in light of Christ's coming and impending return and a faith that leads to changes in our lives and in the lives of others for the better.

### **WHAT DO YOU SEE?**

And so I close with a question: What would you have seen and heard on that first Christmas night? Would you have seen the star in the sky or simply two parents struggling to survive with their newborn in a stable? Would you have heard the choirs of angels singing or simply the sounds of barnyard animals shifting around? Would you have felt the warm presence of God's Holy Spirit, or the chill of the cold east wind? Would you have understood the message of Emmanuel, God with us, or would the whole event have just passed you by? What would you have seen and heard?

In this world of ours, God never presents Himself in a manner in which we are forced to believe. We are always left with an option. God gives us the choice. He gives us the freedom. That's why one person can say, "It's a coincidence," while another can say "No, it's miracle." Why one person insists life is one big accident, while another knows that there is a purpose and plan to this life of ours and it is found in Jesus Christ.

So what's in your heart this Christmas: a Christmas wish or a living Christmas faith? Jesus said, ***"When the Son of Man returns, will He find faith on the earth?"*** My prayer this Christmas is that the answer for all of us is a resounding, "Yes!" In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, AMEN!