

Feast of the Nativity – Christmas Day, December 25, 2007, Year A

St. Bartholomew's Church in the Town of Tonawanda, N.Y

The Rev. Fr. John E. Commins+ - Associate Rector

Scripture: Luke 2:1-20

"God Became Man On That First Christmas Night"

A Sunday school teacher asked her class of kindergarteners to draw a picture of the manger scene at Bethlehem. In the corner of one student's sketch was a very plump, jolly-looking fellow: "Tell me about this person," requested the teacher, pointing to the portly character. "Oh," replied the pupil, "that's Round John Virgin."

Far too often, people get confused about what we're celebrating, why we're celebrating it, and who should be the focus of our celebration. That's why today, we reflect on the true meaning of Christmas.

In the message the angels delivered to the shepherds on the night of Jesus' birth, we first learn what Christmas is all about - God sending His Son to earth. This wasn't man's idea, it was God's idea. Christmas wasn't man's initiative, it was God's initiative. Christmas came about because of God. Today, let's try to think about the reasons why God did what He did at Christmas.

First - **Christmas came into being because of God's Desire to:**

- **Embrace us with His love** - "*Good News that will be to all the people.*" There are a whole lot of people who could use some good news: those who feel lonely and unloved, isolated and un-forgiven. Did you know that pollsters say that **one out of five Americans say that life is meaningless?** How terribly sad!

People do get lonely. We all do from time to time. As a matter of fact, the renowned Albert Einstein once said, "It's strange to be known so universally and yet be so personally lonely." But we are not alone; **we can never be alone if we know Jesus Christ.**

Just read John 3:16 and you'll see what I mean. St. Augustine had the right idea zero in on it as well: "He loves each one of us, as if there were only one of us."

You might have heard about the young man who sent a love letter to his girlfriend. It read: "Darling, I'd climb the highest mountain, sail the widest ocean, cross the hottest desert just to see you." P.S. - I'll be over Saturday night if it doesn't rain." We laugh at his fickleness, but, you know what - I feel bad for the girl who longs for true love, not empty promises. God does not offer empty promises. Through sending His Son, He has fully demonstrated his love for us. "*But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.*" (Romans 5:8) Because of Jesus Christ's sacrifice for us on the cross, we can, through faith in Him, enter into **a loving relationship with Almighty God that is everlasting.** "*I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.*" (Romans 8:38-39)

Christmas came into being because of God's Desire to:

- **Encourage us with His peace** - "*Do not be afraid*"
The shepherds were fearful because they encountered the "*glory of the Lord.*" Knowing their sinfulness, the shepherds trembled in the presence of God. Jesus came so that we could no longer live in fear of God's judgment and condemnation, but so that we might have peace in our hearts - knowing that in Him we have His forgiveness.

Many today do not believe that salvation comes through Jesus Christ alone. We hear that He is only one of many ways to salvation. The world needs a savior because without

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one – we are lost. Do you believe you cannot be saved? Are you hopeless and without direction? Jesus Christ will save you. Come to Him as you are. Listen to these words from Romans 5:1 *“Therefore having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.”*

Thank God that He loves us enough to send us a savior – Jesus Christ – His Son!

Christmas came into being because of God’s Desire to:

- **Enrich us with His joy** - *"Great joy"*

In a large stone cathedral in Europe there was a very large, magnificent pipe organ. It was a Saturday afternoon, and the sexton was making one final check of the choir and organ loft. He heard footsteps coming up the stone stairway, as he thought the doors were all locked. He turned to see a man in slightly tattered traveling clothes. "Excuse me, sir," the stranger said, "I have come from quite a distance to see the great organ in this cathedral, would you mind opening the console so that I might get a closer look at it?" The man also asked to sit at the bench, and finally to play, but each time the sexton said no – only to finally give in. Overjoyed, the stranger pulled out some stops and began to play. The cathedral was filled with the most beautiful music the sexton had ever heard. Then, the stranger stopped playing and slid off the organ bench and started to leave. "Wait!" cried the sexton. "That was the most beautiful music I have ever heard in the cathedral. Who are you?" The stranger turned for just a moment as he said, "Mendelssohn." This man was none other than Felix Mendelssohn, one of the greatest organists and composers of the 19th century!

The sexton was alone now in that great stone cathedral, the beautiful organ music still ringing in his ears. "Just think," he said softly, "I almost kept the master from playing his music in my cathedral!" Isn't it true that each one of us has the opportunity to have a personal relationship with the Master of the universe, Jesus Christ. Let's not keep Him from "playing His music" and letting Him be Master of our lives! Jesus said in John 10:10 *“I came that they might have life, and might have it abundantly.”* What was it that the angels spoke of? Not just of "joy," but of **GREAT joy!**

Secondly: **In sending His Son to earth, it was God’s design that Christ would:**

- **Fulfill the Scripture** - *"In the town of David..."* The angels pointed to Christ's birth fulfilling the Old Testament prophecy of Micah 5:2 that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem: *“From you One will go forth for Me to be ruler in Israel. His goings forth are from long ago, From the days of eternity.”*

In the Old Testament there are 116 prophecies of the coming of the Messiah, all of them made hundreds of years before the birth of Jesus and fulfilled to the letter in Jesus Christ, the Messiah. George Heron, a French mathematician, calculated that the odds of one man fulfilling only 40 of those prophecies **are 1 in 10 to the power of 157**. That is **a 1 followed by 157 zeros**. Compare it to this; the odds of winning the state lottery are **14 followed by 6 zeros**.

Imagine if we brought together forty different artists from all kinds of background - all styles – all with varying skills. Then we take a huge canvas and cut it into little pieces. Each artist gets a piece of canvas and is told, “go and let God inspire you to paint on that canvas the impressions of what God would have you paint.” And they would paint - some of nature - some of people - some abstract - some free form –all according to their style and personality and of course, their skill. Then, we gather up all of those separate paintings and put them back on that wall - into a whole canvas again. We would have a mosaic of the canvases of forty artists, and every picture

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fitted in with the next one, and in the center of the picture was the beautiful face of a man, Jesus Christ. Well, my brothers and sisters in Christ, the mosaic of the writings of all the prophets began to flow and fit together – just like that example. In the Old Testament, the prophecy comes clear and a single stream flows to this ultimate climax when God said, I reveal myself to some at this level, some at this level, and some at this level - until the prophetic revelation of God comes to its fulfillment in the sending of His only Son, Jesus Christ. Mary and Joseph traveled to Bethlehem in order that the prophecy might be fulfilled, and there, Jesus Christ was born.

In sending His Son to earth, it was God’s design that Christ would:

- **Provide our Salvation** - *“A Savior has been born”*

It has been said that if our greatest need had been information, God would have, sent us an educator. If our greatest need had been technology, God would have sent us a scientist. If our greatest need had been money, God would have sent us an economist. If our greatest need had been pleasure, God would have sent us an entertainer. But our greatest need was forgiveness, so God sent us a Savior.

A father and daughter went hiking into the mountains to enjoy some time together. While walking down a dusty trail, a rattlesnake attacked and plunged his fangs into the little girl’s leg. She screamed. The dad grabbed the girl’s leg and checked out the wound. Out there in the wilderness, he knew that he needed to act quickly. Pulling a sharp knife from his pocket, he quickly slit across the wounds on her leg and sucked the poison from her leg, spitting it on the ground. He then picked her up and headed back for help. Exhausted and frightened, he slumped into a chair in the emergency vehicle and began to feel dizzy. A doctor checked the dad and learned that the poison had made its way into an open sore in the man’s mouth and hit his blood stream. He died, but she lived. That is what Jesus did for us. He died so that we might live. His death on the cross paid the price for our sins.

In sending His Son to earth, it was God’s design that Christ would:

Rule as Sovereign - *“He is Christ, the Lord”*

Remember the old hit song, from the movie and TV show “Fame?” The words “I’m gonna live forever. They’re gonna know my name.” Many people go to almost any length to assure “everyone’s gonna know their name.” Oh, there are many infamous names and then there are the rich and famous. But the name that is above every name is the name of Jesus. *“At the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those who are in heaven, and on earth, and under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord”* (Philippians 2:10-11)

Thirdly - **Christmas occurred through God’s own Decision**

God decided to come as a man - as *“a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger”*

God came to walk among us so that He might wrap His arms around us. Hebrews 4:14 -16 reminds us *“we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and may find grace to help in time of need.”*

God decided to call out to men – *“And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in cloths, and lying in a manger.”*

The Prophet Jeremiah proclaims these words of the Lord: *“And you will seek Me and find Me, when you search for Me with all your heart. And I will be found by you”* (Jeremiah 29:13-14)

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Israeli postal workers find themselves sorting through huge piles of undeliverable mail. Among these dead letters are many that are addressed to God. Some have been forwarded by foreign postal workers who think someone in Israel might know what to do with them. Eventually, all of these petitions to God end up at a recycling plant in central Israel. Our Lord Jesus Christ made it crystal clear as He told us who He is – and why He came: “*I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.*” (John 14:6) Unless our communications with God are addressed, "John 14:6," they're sure to have the same fate as those dead letters in Israel.

Jesus is the only way in which we can make a connection with God. That's why He came on that first Christmas night, and that is what Christmas is all about.

I would like to share a very personal experience with you, from 1976 – the year that my father went home to be with the Lord. It was a tough year for me – and I believe I was given these words – as comfort.

The First Christmas Night

Written by the Rev. John E. Commins

1976, revised 2002

**On a night in the desert
The angels did sing,
That born to mankind
Was their Savior, their King**

**A star in the sky
was a true guiding light
To a stable in Bethlehem**

**And there, in a manger,
lay a baby so small
who the world would soon realize
is King of us all**

**Joseph and Mary,
They knelt by the child
To the shepherds and others
The Christ Child just smiled**

**And there round His head
Angels sang with delight
For God became man
On that first Christmas night.**