Christmas Eve, Cycle C

Old St. Pat’s, 2021 (3:30 p.m.)

Although the church teaches that

that the most important feast of the year is Easter

not Christmas

and the traditional "mystery of faith" that we chant is

Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again

not Christ was born, Mary was present, Joseph stood

off to the side

and we don't sing carols at Pentecost

or set up Shrines for the feast of Christ the King

or have midnight mass on the parish's patronal feast

Yet at Christmas we do it all.

So why do we expend such energy on this feast?

and celebrate it so lavishly?

While there are many reasons,

for me the central one is that this feast

celebrates the most comforting and yet shocking

aspect of Christian revelation: God’s humanity.

We expect God to be divine and be almighty ...

and so we have plenty of divinity centered feasts

celebrating God's omnipotence

Easter and Ascension

Christ the King and the Transfiguration

But in the whole of the Christian year

we only have two great Christological feasts

which seem more focused on the humanity of God:

Christmas: when God’s humanity is refracted in a crèche

and Good Friday, when God’s humanity is refracted on a cross.

and it doesn’t takes a rocket scientist

to help the preacher figure out

that we prefer the crèche over the cross.

This is a feast where through images of mother and child

Angels and swaddling clothes

we glimpse something not only of the commitment

but of the affection that God must have for us.

We taste something of the passion

that God must feel for us.

We glimpse something of the communion

that God longs for with us.

And the secret gospel here

is that, if God can have such affection, such passion for us

maybe we can learn such affection, even passion for God.

And those whom God so loves.

This is at once the great treasure of this feast

and its unmet challenge

For while God has united with humanity

God is still waiting for humanity's journey to the divine

in a world where there is too much violence

where too many people lack basic human needs

and upholding the dignity of all

too often seems like unwelcome mythology.

In 1994 two US educators were hired

by the Russian Dept. of education

To teach morals and ethics based on biblical principles[[1]](#endnote-1)

Among other venues, they taught in one orphanage

Where they related the nativity story to about 100 orphans.

Each child was then given 3 pieces of cardboard

To make a manger

With napkins shreds for straw

And an image of the baby cut from felt.

The kids were busy assembling their mangers

When the educators discovered that 6 year old Misha

Had a manger with two babies in it.

When he was asked why,

he accurately retold the story he had heard

Until he got to the placing of Jesus in the manger.

Then he began to ad-lib

Saying that Jesus looked at him and

Asked Misha if he had a place to stay.

But Misha had no mother or father, and no place to stay

Jesus then said he could stay with him

But Misha, remembering the wise men,

Had no gift to give Jesus, but asked him:

“if I kept you warm is that be enough?”

Jesus said it was the best gift anyone had offered him

So Misha said he got into the manger

And Jesus told him he could stay with him always.

The educators then write that Misha’s eyes brimmed with tears

and sobbed as he had found someone

who would never abandon him

Who would stay with him always.

When a 6 year old is alone in an orphanage

When a 50 year old is alone on the street

When a 15 year old is alone in juvie detention

When an 80 year old is alone in a nursing home:

Then the work of Christmas is unfinished

The mystery of incarnation incomplete

And “joy to the world” remains a looming mandate.

There is something unique about preaching this early Christmas eve

When NORAD – The North American Aerospace Command

Has turned its formidable detection capacities

Momentarily away from satellites, bombers and drones

And is currently tracking a jolly guy in a red suit

Who at last report was leaving Wales

And heading north to Scotland.

I know some liturgical types think it inappropriate

Even to mention Kris Kringle on this incarnational feast

But I believe deeply that this widely accepted cultural symbol

Has much to teach us about the unfinished business of Christmas.

An anonymous author[[2]](#endnote-2) writes about the time

His older sister dropped the bomb: “there’s no Santa!”

He remembers tearing across town on my bike to visit Grandma

“My grandma was not the gushy kind, never had been.

I fled to her that day because I knew she would tell me the truth

and the truth always went down a whole lot easier

when devouring one of her world-famous cinnamon buns.  
  
Grandma was home, and the buns were still warm.

Between bites, I told her everything.

She was ready for me.

"No Santa Claus!" she snorted. "Ridiculous! Don't believe it.

That rumor has been going around for years,

and it makes me mad, plain mad.

Now, put on your coat, and let's go."  
  
"Go? Go where, Grandma?" I asked.

I hadn't even finished my second cinnamon bun.

"Where" turned out to be Kerby's General Store.

As we walked through its doors, Grandma handed me ten dollars.

That was a bundle in those days.

"Take this money and buy something for someone who needs it.

I'll wait for you in the car."

Then she turned and walked out: I was 8 years old

had often gone shopping with my mother, but never by myself.

For a few moments I just stood there, confused

clutching that ten-dollar bill, wondering what to buy,

and who on earth to buy it for.

I thought of everybody I knew:

family, friends, neighbors, people who went to my church.

I was just about thought out,

when I thought of Bobbie Decker.

He was a kid who sat right behind me in 2nd grade.

Bobbie Decker didn't have a coat.

I knew that because when we went out for recess in winter

His mother always wrote a note, reporting that he had a cough,

but all us kids knew that Bobbie Decker didn't have a cough,

what he didn't have was a coat.   
  
I settled on a red corduroy one that had a hood

It looked real warm.

"Is this a Christmas present for someone?" the lady behind the counter asked kindly, as I laid my ten dollars down. "Yes, ma'am," I replied shyly. "It's for Bobby.”

The nice lady smiled at me, as I told her about how Bobby really needed a good winter coat. I didn't get any change, but she put the coat in a bag, smiled again, and wished me a Merry Christmas.

That evening, Grandma helped me wrap the coat. (A little tag fell out of the coat, and Grandma tucked it in her Bible). We wrapped the coat in Christmas paper and ribbons and wrote, "To Bobby, From Santa Claus" on it.

Grandma said that Santa always insisted on secrecy.

Then she drove me over to Bobbie Decker's house,

explaining as we went that I was now and forever

officially one of Santa's helpers.

Grandma parked down the street from Bobbie's house,

she and I crept noiselessly

and hid in the bushes by his front walk.

Then Grandma gave me a nudge.

"All right, Santa Claus," she whispered, "get going."

I took a deep breath, dashed for his front door,

threw the present down on his step, pounded his doorbell

and flew back to the safety of the bushes and grandma.  
  
Together we waited breathlessly in the darkness

for the front door to open.

Finally it did, and there stood Bobbie.

Forty years haven't dimmed the thrill of those moments

spent shivering, beside my grandma,

in Bobbie Decker's bushes.

That night, I realized that those awful rumors about Santa Claus

were just what Grandma said they were: ridiculous.

Santa was alive and well, and we were on his team.

I still have Grandma’s Bible, with the coat tag tucked inside: $19.95.

This nativity feast not only remembers that God once dwelt among us

but that through the birth of the Christ

God forever and eternally

wed himself to humanity

and thus summoned us to complete the gift of incarnation

by wedding our humanity to God’s divinity

and be the enduring presence of Christ in the world.

We take up that task

in a world where are rumors of demise

not only of Santa Claus but of God

subtly peddled through the prejudice

the small mindedness

the greed that subverts the promise of this holy season.

This silent night could be no more than a quaint moment

in which we offer congratulations to a young homeless couple

occupying a handsome crèche

with only one child and no Misha, and no other orphans to be seen.

Or it can be a vocational plunge

that commits us to allow the child be born in us again

And so with the poet we muse:

This blessed eve, when carols soar

with angel's words unfurled

are we content with pleasantries

or wish to change a world

where children starve and nations rage

and greed is how we plod

where even those who bear his name, live

as there was no God.

There is another way to be

a way the gospel charts

and that is to embrace the Christ

and birth him in our hearts.

And so this magic Christmas eve

commit to one clear call

accept the mission from God's Child

of peace, good will toward all.

1. https://www.newburghpresby.org/post/2018/12/24/two-babies-in-a-manger [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. https://www.godsotherways.com/stories/2019/12/14/grandma-and-santa-claus [↑](#endnote-ref-2)