

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ  
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor  
Sermon for the Service of Baptism, December 27, 2009  
Lessons: Jeremiah 31:16-20 and Luke 2:6-7,21-24; 18:15-16

## JESUS AND OUR CHILDREN

Christmas is the only birthday celebration I know that focuses on the birth itself and the person as a baby. When we recognize their birthdays, we do not tell stories of the infant George Washington or of baby Abraham Lincoln or Martin Luther King, Jr. We speak of their accomplishments as adults not their arrivals as newborns. True, the Bible contains a tale of the threat to the infant Moses and God's deliverance of the child who would later lead the Israelites out of their slavery, but I don't know of any further attention paid by Judaism to baby Moses. To my knowledge, only Jesus gets so much celebration of his birth as such and reappears every year in our religion and culture as a baby.

There are reasons, good and not so good, for all of this attention to the baby in Christianity, but the primary reason for celebrating Jesus' birth is what we call the Incarnation: the *becoming flesh* of God's own creative Word of life-giving and redemptive love. The Son of God was born as one of us, in the same way every person is born into this world. God's child arrives as one of our children.

There is a phrase that has found its way into Christian speech, mainly it seems through one of the Christmas carols we're singing this morning: "veiled in flesh." A veil is just a flimsy covering, something put on temporarily to be taken off, revealing the truth, something that hides the truth from sight and prevents eye contact. For the more authoritarian forms of Christianity, the truth of the Incarnation is that the flesh is just a covering for the divinity of Christ, which is the real message. When Christians want power and glory, dominion and authority, they desire a divine Jesus with as little humanity as possible. As the King of Kings and reigning Lord of earth and heaven, he has been used to establish and sanctify the power, glory, and authority of his imperial representatives in the world, supposedly bestowing upon them the right to dictate morals and customs and to demand compliance. A wise professor warned us the truth of the Incarnation that would always be most endangered within the church would be Jesus' humanity. It is not his divinity we fear but our own humanity and each other's. The people who gave Jesus trouble and desired his death were those who despised their own humanity and so took out on other people they regarded as sinful and disgusting their self-hatred and shame at being creatures of flesh and blood. They longed for religious and moral perfection when what God wanted and Jesus exemplified was not perfection but compassion.

This morning brings together Christmas and Baptism, the infant Jesus and a baby girl of our own, little Paige Elizabeth. The connection between the two is exactly what the Incarnation is all about. Jesus is not divinity veiled in flesh but God's Son born to be forever one of us so we can be united with him in God's love. He came to be human with us so we could become truly human as God created us to be. The opposite of human is not divine but inhuman—cruel, cold, and unforgiving. Our inhumanity uses other people without establishing and respecting relationship, blocking the interplay that creates understanding and empathy. Without empathy, we do evil.

Of all the truths revealed in the Bible, the most remarkable is God's deeply personal and passionate commitment to us. It seems to trouble the religiously principled that God cares so much. While they are busy telling other people, "Get it right!" God is calling them, "Be mine; let yourself be loved so you can learn to love; accept compassion so you can feel it and show it to each other." The very truth of God became human so we can become human. God cares so much for us that God would rather suffer and even die than give up on us and lose us in eternity. People think love is a weakness. The Bible reveals for us and Jesus embodies for us the truth that love is the only power God cares about and the one perfection God recognizes.

The metaphor of the parent's love for the child figures so prominently in the Bible because it expresses better than any other we have God's heartache and angry grief when we turn away from God and against each other. What more poignant and recognizable image could we be given for God's longing for our love and God's joy at our return?

Today, we have baptized a baby girl: a bright-eyed, curious, wonderful child who has been welcomed with open arms into a loving family and now is officially and sacramentally welcomed with open arms into this community of faith in Jesus Christ. Paige is our child, entrusted to us by God whose child she is most truly. In Baptism, she is united with Jesus in his death so she can be united with him also in his resurrection to newness of life, and that newness of life begins now. The woman, a Paige Elizabeth who might have come to be apart from Christ, in hiding from God's grace, she is never now to become. She is a child of the covenant of grace, committed by her parents and her church to growing up as a little sister to the Son of God. That sounds terribly pretentious, and it would be if being Jesus' sister had anything to do with power, prestige, glory, or some kind of superiority over other children. It does not. It has "only" to do with living as a child loved deeply and personally by God and, therefore, called to become increasingly responsive to God's love in ways that result in humility and respectful compassion for others. One of the worst things we could do to Paige or any of our children would be to instill in her a sense of superiority over others.

But just as damaging or nearly so would be to inflict upon her a sense of inferiority. Because they belong with Jesus Christ, our children are neither worthy nor unworthy of God's favor; instead, they live in God's love. We are not to make them children of pride or children of shame. God's grace frees them from both and enables them to be human.

Baptism is a joyous event, and the calendar coincidence of a baptism the Sunday after Christmas reminds us of the connection between that baby in the manger and our children. "Let them come to me," Jesus insists, "because to such as these the kingdom of God belongs." Baptism is our sacrament, for bringing our children to him. It is also our act of commitment to continuing to bring our children to him. We love our children by nature, but that's not enough, because our love-by-nature can grow very selfish and demanding and start looking upon our children as though they were born to feed our pride, fulfill our expectations, or make up for our disappointments in life. Today, we are called by Baptism to join in God's own love for our children, the love that holds on to them even as it sets them free. God has entrusted children to our care so we can keep entrusting them back to God's love and care. That's what we have done this morning: we have thanked God for entrusting Paige to her parents, her extended family, and her church so we can keep entrusting her to Jesus Christ until she learns enough and matures enough to start entrusting herself to him, also. Parental love, of course, does not stop there, wiping its hands and telling itself the job is done. As it reflects God's own parental love, it never stops but rejoices in the grace and freedom into which the child keeps growing. Amen.