

December 24, 2009 - Rt. Rev. Robert C. Johnson, Jr. [PDF] (Isaiah 9:2-4, 6-7; Titus 2:11-14; Luke 2:1-20)

This is my favorite night of the year. I love Christmas and I love children. So what more could I ask? Christmas and children are a natural and perfect combination. Charlie Brown's little sister, Sally, announces, "I volunteered to write for our class play for Christmas. In the opening scene, Geronimo talks to the Virgin Mary." Charlie Brown interrupts, "It wasn't Geronimo. It was Gabriel." Looking very surprised, Sally responds, "Really? Well, the kid who plays Geronimo is going to be very, very disappointed."

Christmas and children are a natural combination, but they are also a conglomeration. Different stories can become mixed and confused. Santa Claus and Jesus are co-stars. The North Pole and Bethlehem share the same maps. The mall and the manger have moved into the same neighborhood. Rudolph and the star both share the sky. The Grinch and King Herod are co-villains. Elves and wise men all are mysterious foreigners. One four-year old asked me once if the stable had a chimney so that Santa could bring gifts to the baby Jesus.

I've heard others say many times -- and I've said it to myself -- Christmas is for children. But maybe that's not as true as we assume. Maybe it's more accurate to say Santa Claus is for children. Christmas is for somebody else. Not only is this my favorite night of the year, this is also my favorite church service of the year. You know why? The music, the candles, the mood, the late hour. But a big reason I love this service is that fewer children than usual are here. Do not misunderstand me. Look around you. This is one service at St. Luke's where most of us are old enough to vote. Most of us work for a living or have earned our retirement. Most of us have failed a few times. Most of us have scars, not just wrinkles.

If Christmas is for children, why are we here? Why do you love Christmas? Why do you love this particular service? You may never have put it into words, but aren't you at least a little relieved and encouraged that the Christian celebration of God's incarnation is not a pediatric exercise and not a bedtime story? Aren't you glad that other adults, other thinking people you know and admire believe that Christmas is for them, too? When the youngest ones are safely in bed, aren't you glad for the chance to trudge through the darkness to a candlelit church and claim Christmas for yourself? I am. I want to know that Christmas is not a television special sponsored by a toy company.

I am impatient with Christmas as an exception to real life as though that 24 hours we pretend that the world is not really the way it is. Like opposing armies on a battlefield who call a truce for Christmas Day. We assume that Christmas can't really happen in a world like this. But if it can't happen in a real world, how can it happen at all? I want a real Christmas. Not a fairy tale one. I want a life and death Christmas. A sweat and blood Christmas. A God with us in this mess Christmas. Not many children are wise enough to recognize the real Christmas, but you and I are close to that wisdom. At least we hope for the real Christmas or we wouldn't be here. Christmas is for us and others like us.

Just recently we were celebrating again the collapse of communism, dancing on the grave of inhumanity to other humans. This Christmas we are grieving the very birth of the inhumanity we thought we had buried. Christmas is for us in this kind of world. This closing year has brought storms and starvation and floods and destruction. Christmas is for a world like that. Everybody here knows somebody for whom this season is the hardest time of the year to stay sober. Some of us are those people. Christmas is for them and for us. Some people we love are ill and dying in spite of all we can do. Can Christmas happen in that kind of world? That kind of pain? That kind of sadness? Of course it can. In fact, that's why Christmas happens at all. If it didn't happen in this kind of a world, what good is it?

The story of the birth of a special baby in Bethlehem is the Bible's way of telling us that God has moved into our neighborhood. There is a God and God is not absent. God is close. God is here. God is Emmanuel. God is with us. At the heart of the universe is not an equation, but a person. At the heart of existence is not a question mark, but an exclamation point. The center of life is not an abyss, but an embrace. The essence of meaning is not a hell, but a haven. The definition of God is not a concept, but a concern. The mind of God is not a riddle to be figured out, but a presence to be enjoyed. The heart of God is not a natural law, but a supernatural love.

God loves this world. God is in this world. God is with us in this world. Life is precious to you and to me and life is precious to God. Your life is precious to God. Long or short, life is precious to God. Success or failure, life is precious to God. Healthy or ill, life is precious to God. Your very pain is precious to God. My struggle is precious to God. Your desire to be Godly is precious to God. Our need for forgiveness is precious to God. All of our living is precious to God, and God is in our living. Our dying is precious to God, and God is with us in our dying. Isn't that what the incarnation of God means? God is in this flesh with us and is with us this day no matter what. It's dark outside, but not inside. In here with you I do believe that God has caused this holy night to shine with the brightness of the true light. All the darkness in the world cannot smother that light.

I have two anecdotes that I'm aware of that I would like to demonstrate how some children have learned the Gospel. A five-year old in the St. Luke's Kindergarten years ago shortly before I left to join some other job, but I was leaving that -- nearly that Christmas to that class, and I was describing how Jesus lived early in his life in Bethlehem. The five-year old said, "Jesus is not in Bethlehem. Jesus lives in our hearts." Five-year old. Jesus lives in our hearts.

Second anecdote, November the 30th, a month ago -- no older than four -- the girl that I am talking about was no more than four. Connie and I decided she had to be no more than four. We had walked into a large mall in this county doing some shopping. No sooner had I come into the mall and to the shopping center and I could hear a loud, beautiful sounding voice, a young voice. Connie heard it, too. I wanted to find that voice. It took me a while walking among the aisles. I found her in a stroller. Her mother was pushing and pulling her around the aisles doing some shopping. Little girl had no need for shopping. That was not her interest. I wanted to share with you her song that she was singing and that I was delighted to hear.

Connie and I when we got back to the car, we tried to write down what this young lady was singing. It's not exactly right, but pretty close, what she was singing. "Happy, happy people. All you happy people. Jesus, happy birthday. Happy birthday. Happy, happy people. All you happy people." Sort of over and over again. For about ten minutes I basked in her music and her pleasure. Our eyes made touch with each other. And it was about time for me to leave, so we made eye contact. And I gave her kind of a slight wave. I was leaving and she smiled and said (blew kisses) -- blowing me all the sweets that she could give me.

My dear friends, which are some of you -- not all of you because you don't know me -- those of you whom I know and whose friendship and past we have shared, I want you too to sing happy songs, all of you happy people. Good night. Merry Christmas.