

**The Rev. Christine Love Mendoza**  
**The Church of the Good Shepherd**  
**Christmas Eve - The Feast of the Incarnation – December 24, 2021**  
**Luke 2:1-20**

*“For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given;... and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counselor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace.” In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

This evening, we celebrate the Feast of the Incarnation. In our Christmas worship, we commemorate the nativity of the Christ child, but what we are celebrating is not simply Jesus’ “birthday,” in the way we celebrate our own birthdays. We are celebrating the mystery of Emmanuel, God-with-us, God revealed in created time and space. As the Rev. Dr. Samuel Wells writes, “Christmas reveals God’s desire to be with us.”

At Christmastime we explore the mystery of the Incarnation – that, in Jesus, God became human. The implications of the Incarnation are deep and profound. St. Athanasius, one of the great fathers and theologians of the Church, tells us, “The Son of God became human so that we might become God.” This is fertile theological ground, but it can also lead us into dangerous territory. It is important to note that we do not become God in the way that God is God, but we become like-God in a human way. The eastern Christian tradition has done a much better job of reminding people of this powerful truth than our western tradition. They have a beautiful Greek word to describe this process: *theosis*, literally to make divine. Often translated as divinization or deification, it means that through this process we partake in the divine nature. That through our transformation in Christ, we are able to enter into communion with God – to share in the intimate relationship of love between the Father and the Son.

We cannot understand who Jesus is as Son of God without understanding our own identity and calling as children of God. That Jesus is both human and divine means that through our communion with him and his humanity, we share in his divinity. We literally become *dwelling places for God* here in *this* world and in *this* time. Christmas is not simply a celebration of who Jesus is; it is also a celebration of who we are!

This evening, we also gather to retell and remember the Christmas Story – the nativity story of Jesus – as given to us in the Gospel of Luke. In the city of David, in the reign of Emperor Augustus and Quirinius, governor of Syria, a baby is born to a young couple. This young maiden and her betrothed were both formed and prepared for this earth-changing event, and yet they were also subject to circumstances entirely beyond their control. Outside of the bit about the angel and the heavenly host, this story is so ordinary as to be hardly worth remarking, babies are born every day to all sorts of people in all sorts of unusual circumstances. That Jesus was born in a barn, or a cave, or some small outbuilding to a public inn is hardly worth remarking, not to mention continually retelling the story over two thousand years later. We all have heard amazing and unusual birth stories – the surprise arrival of a precious child in an unexpected. The nativity story of Jesus is both an event at once completely ordinary – one that happens all the time, everywhere, to so many people – and yet it also completely extraordinary.

Part of what makes the story of Christmas remarkable is its specificity – that the cosmic salvation promised by God for all of creation would be brought about by the incarnation of the Godhead into this particular baby born to this particular woman and man, in this particular time and place. Theologians call this principle of concrete-to-universal knowing the “scandal of particularity.” John Duns Scotus asserted that God only created particulars and individuals, a quality he named “thisness.” Thisness grounds the cosmic principles of incarnation in the concrete and the specific.

This notion of thisness is important because you can't really love universals. It's hard to love concepts, forces, or ideas. Love – God incarnate – always begins with particulars: this man, this dog, this Moses, this Virgin Mary, this Jesus of Nazareth. It is the individual and concrete that opens the heart to love the One who is beyond the concrete. And it is the very *thisness* of the Christmas story that makes it so beautiful and opens our hearts to love.

Scandalous or not, the Incarnation and the Christmas story are essential to the Christian faith. Early in Christian history, when some people denied that Jesus Christ was truly a man, Christians pointed to the fact that he was born of a woman to emphasize Jesus' humanity. Later, when others denied that Jesus was God the Son, Greek Christians began calling Mary *Theotokos*, the "Bearer of God," to emphasize Jesus' true God-ship. In Mary, God gives us a sign that Jesus is both truly God and truly Man.

The Gospel of Luke gives us the remarkable account of the Angel Gabriel who approaches Mary and announces God's plans for her. Gabriel tells her that she, an unmarried young woman in a small town in Galilee, has found favor with God and will bear the Son of God, whom she will name Jesus. What catches my breath every time I read this scripture is that Mary's response to this remarkable and seemingly impossible pronouncement is not to protest the obvious absurdity of this situation. Rather, Mary's response is to faithfully accept God's will for her and to walk in faith the path placed before her. And, as God called and prepared Mary, to be *Theotokos*, we are also called and formed to be *dwelling places for God*.

In Genesis, we are told that God formed mankind in His own image. Theologians often speak of this image-making of humankind as we were soft wax and God impressed his stamp upon us. Being formed in the image of God, means that we bear God within us in a special way. It also means that as we bear this image upon our whole being, we are charged with the responsibility to live our lives faithfully and in integrity with this God-image. We are called to bear our God-image in this fearful and hurting world – to shine our Christ-light into the darkness.

On *this* day, in *this* place, within *our* hearts, Christ comes to us and makes a dwelling place within us. No matter how unusual, unexpected, or, perhaps, how entirely ordinary our circumstances, we are invited to make room for God to be born within us. Let us receive the Christ-child in our hearts with love and faithfulness, and boldly bear Christ's light in the world!

This evening, I wish you a happy and healthy holiday, and a very Merry Christmas. May your sorrows be few and your spirits be bright. For, as the angel proclaimed to the shepherds in the field, "Do not be afraid; for see – I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people; to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord."

Amen.