

**CHRISTMAS DAY, DECEMBER 25, 2022, LUM SUNDAY DEVOTIONAL
THE BEST CHRISTMAS PRESENT OF ALL: "GOD'S BABY"**

SCRIPTURE FOCUS: ISAIAH 9:6

For a child has been born for us,
a son given to us;
authority rests upon his shoulders,
and he is named
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

And LUKE 2: 6

6 While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. 7 And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth and laid him in a manger, because there was no place in the guest room.

BLESSED THOUGHTS: "INFANT HOLY, INFANT LOWLY"

Of all the Bible stories, the Birth of Jesus is probably the most familiar and most beloved, yet I never FULLY understood it until our Church invited a pastor from the Cameroons to tour our province during the month of December. This wonderful man was a supper guest at our house in Lac du Bonnet before he was invited to speak at our annual Women's Advent Celebration that evening, and I always remember how respectfully he addressed my wife as "Madame." Now English was nowhere near his first language. He grew up speaking his African language and then learned French, but he did his best to share with us how an African Christian understood the Christmas story.

He told us that when missionaries first came to the villages, they would always want to start talking about Jesus by sharing the Christmas story, but when they began by saying that Christmas tells us how God came to live among us, the people would shriek in protest. You see, they were afraid of all the gods around them. There was a god of the river: if you angered this god, he might send a crocodile to eat your children. If you angered the god of the forest, he might send a leopard to kill your wife. The worst seemed to be the god of the night. That god loved to attack people by letting snakes or spiders bite them. So, the main religious duty of those villagers was to keep the gods away from them. They might sacrifice a chicken so that the god who had been acting up lately would eat the chicken instead, and just leave them alone. So, the idea that a god would hide inside a human and actually come into your village terrified them no end!

Now, before you accuse those African villagers of being superstitious, remember that our own Bible talks about the fear of God many more times than it does about the love of God. Sadly, in our day so many students no longer respect their teachers, and too many grown-ups don't respect the police, and it's been fashionable for far too long to neither respect nor even worry about whether there is a God, or not!

But I've seen the look of terror on a dying man, just moments before his appointment with the Judge of all the Earth. Had that man never heard the Gospel: that God so loved the world that he sent us his only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in Him would not perish,

but have everlasting life? I can only hope that my terrified friend at last received that love on the Other Side!

Then there's that poor Fundamentalist preacher who came to me at Fort St. John. It seems that one of his members wanted their infant grandchild baptized, but his church didn't "believe" in infant baptism. He came to see me for two reasons, first, because our congregation was a group of people who cared both for our fundamentalist sisters and brothers, and for our mainline ones as well, and, second, because he knew we Lutherans performed infant baptism, and he wanted me to "prove" to him that our practice was acceptable to God, since he couldn't find any reference to it in scripture. (He was right, there is no clear indication that babies were baptized in New Testament times). So, he challenged me, "How could I baptize these little beings?"

I knew I had no Scriptural "Proof" that would ease his dilemma, and any talk of another ritual we call Confirmation (in which teens say a "Yes" to the promises made at their baptism) would have only shed further darkness. So, I gave the lamest explanation—ever. I told him Lutherans are like a fast-food franchise. Burger King doesn't sell Big Macs, and McDonalds doesn't sell Whoppers. We poor parish pastors usually just do what our Church's tradition tells us to.

But, then, I asked him, "Is your God a Poet or a Politician?" "Huh," he responded. I replied, "Well, is your religious practice something that grows out of strict rules, or out of deep feelings that the Story of God inspires?" I explained that as a parent of three children, each one's birth was a miracle for which my wife and I were still so grateful. And here's the thing. If the greatest gift of all is the gift of life, isn't it amazing that no one in human history ever had to be good enough to "earn" that gift! If the greatest gift of all can be so freely and so graciously given, why should we also not rejoice to pray over our babies and ask God's blessing on them and on their parents? And, surely, each newborn deserves a prayer that he or she will always live close to their God, every day of their lives! Just ask a kid who is in middle school how tough that can be!

So, we're back to where we started. I pray that all of you will have the gift of a baby in your life. I'm not talking only about your children and step-children, or your grandchildren, or your little kids if you're a nursery school teacher. I'm especially praying that you'll see why God came to us, not as a hungry crocodile, nor as a fierce jungle animal, nor as a terror in the night, but as a vulnerable fetus, then as a newborn, and, finally, as a middle school-aged boy in the temple who already had his heart on the things of God! God doesn't want us to figure out ways to keep Jesus Christ far away, but, rather, inside, in the warmth of our caring and of our thinking and of our day-by-day activities. When we achieve that, then the Gospel is not just a story, it is our Life!

CHRISTMAS PRAYER

1. Infant holy, infant lowly, for his bed a cattle stall;
oxen lowing, little knowing Christ the babe is Lord of all.
Swift are winging angels singing, Bells are ringing, tidings bringing;
Christ the babe is Lord of all; Christ the babe is Lord of all!

2. Flocks were sleeping, shepherds keeping vigil till the morning new;

saw the glory, heard the story - tidings of a gospel true.
Thus rejoicing, free from sorrow, praises voicing, greet the morrow:
Christ the babe was born for you; Christ the babe was born for you!

--Translated from the Polish, by Edith M G Reed (1885-1933)

MUSICAL BLESSING

Here's a challenge—pick just one Christmas hymn! I selected this one because, in 1919, a former British Army padre wanted a Christmas service to help his people heal from the grief and horrors of the Great War, so he invited one and all to join him in a service of readings and carols held outside, in a barn. He insisted that the first song should be "Once in Royal David's City." The tradition continues to this day at King's College in Cambridge, and so, may this special song help us find God's Peace:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mNzgeSUB4fk>

A blessed Christmas to you all from Pastor Barry Bence