
The Gift of Christmas

--KatherineFeng20241229--

Welcome to the 1st Sunday after Christmas. There are three accounts of Christmas story in the Bible. In the Gospel of Luke, we see vivid images of the manger, shepherds, and angels. In the Gospel of Matthew, we hear stories of Joseph's dream, the visit of three wise men from the East, and Jesus' family fled to Egypt. In the Gospel of John, we hear the 3rd story, a story tells no historical details but the theology of the Christmas, which is something much more important.

As a theologian and mystic that deeply influenced by Greek philosophy, John tells us a Cosmic Christmas story that is more inclusive of all people by saying "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.....In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind.....The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us." Throughout his gospel, John relates a theological view of who Jesus was to humanity and gives us the clearest understanding of the incarnation God in flesh appearing.

In the most tender, humble, and fragile way, Christ was born in a form of human infant, lying in a manger with dangers lurking around. His birth brought the light to the world and dispelled darkness and despair in people's hearts. "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us", God descended from heaven and became one of us, lived among ALL people who longed for peace and hope, and worked among ALL people who's in need of salvation and eternity.

The Cathedral Church of St. Peter and St. Paul in Washington, D.C., better known as the Washington National Cathedral, is a place known as a House of Prayer for all People, based on the 1791 L'Enfant plan for the new city of Washington, which described such a building "as a place for public prayer, thanksgivings, funeral Orations, etc., and assigned to the special use of no particular Sect or denomination, but equally open to all..." The National Cathedral ended up being an Episcopal Church because our church--the "bridge church of Christianity"--was the only one willing to put money behind a cathedral open to all peoples regardless of "sect or denomination" as envisioned by Major Pierre Charles L'Enfant.

Years ago, the National Cathedral had a tradition of displaying a live Nativity creche—with actors and animals—starting about two weeks before each Christmas. Year to year, different artistic directors were engaged to set up the live Nativity. Then one year, the lead volunteer of the National Cathedral's soup kitchen took charge of the set up.

In that year, the stable was rendered as a simple cardboard shack with a contemporary Joseph and Mary who looked very much like two homeless people on the street who frequented the soup kitchen. A black baby Jesus was swaddled in well-worn rags and lying in a tattered box that read "Pampers" on the side. There were "shepherds" of sorts with scraggly dogs for "sheep" and a bag

lady as the angel. Several police officers were there as kings and one of them was riding on a horse. Mary and Joseph were both kneeling beside the diaper box, and the black baby Jesus appeared to be already able to smile up at them. Bannered above the live Nativity creche were the words: “Christ was born for this!”

“Christ was born for this!” Not everyone was happy with that year’s Nativity. But perhaps due to the extra press about it in Washington, more people attended Christmas Eve services at the Cathedral of St. Peter and St. Paul that year than ever before.

“Christ was born for this!” Christ was born for the joy, the generosity and the simple beauty brought to the humanity, and He was born for the transformative change in our hearts and attitudes, so we may maintain an openness to all peoples. Christ was born for the healing of the sufferings and over-burdened individuals and families, and He was born for the proclamation of God’s true love to all His creations and the embrace of all people who are diverse in race, language, culture, and religious background.

“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him will not perish but have eternal life.” Giving his one and only Son as a gift to ALL people in the world is God’s work at Christmas. Jesus Christ laid aside all His glory in heaven and humbly became one of us. He brought the light and life to the world and dwelt among us. He demonstrated the true love to us and died on the cross for the salvation of each one of us.

In the Episcopal church calendar, our celebration for Christmas lasts for 2 weeks. It may not be enough for the time we are living in today. Our world needs Christmas not once a year, but every day. Because when we look around, we can find people everywhere who are entangled by all kinds of troubles and living in fear and insecurity; who are suffering from physical and mental illness; and who are less lucky than many of us due to the lack of resources and opportunities.

While we are sitting here in peace and warmth with our family and friends, there are people out there in danger of losing their job, health, homes and nations, and there are victims of violence, discrimination and persecutions. For that reason, as disciples of Jesus, we must step out of our comfort zones and be courageous to preach God’s grace, hope and love by living out our faith and speaking up for those who lost their voice.

When Jesus began His ministry on earth, He proclaimed his mission with the scripture in the book of Isaiah: “The Spirit of the sovereign Lord is on me, because the Lord has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim the freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the blind, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn, and provide for those who grieve in Zion—to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of joy instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair.”

We believe people need Jesus when they are facing oppression and injustice or struggling at the bottom of the valley of their lives. We also believe that Jesus is among those who are poor, hungry and naked. Therefore, we are called to find the lost and heal the brokenhearted, we are called to feed the hungry and to liberate the imprisoned, and we are called to reconcile with God and each other so we may bring the peace of Christ to the whole world.

To us Christians, Christmas is not a one-day celebration, but a lifelong celebration. If we could love one another everyday like we do at Christmas, there will be much less wars and conflicts between people and nations. If we could be as generous everyday as we are at Christmas, there will be much less refugees and homeless people in our society. And, if we could be kind to all people everyday like we are at Christmas, our community will become healthier and more harmonious.

John the Baptist, who testified to the true light of Christ, said, “Anyone who has two shirts should share with the one who has none, and anyone who has food should do the same.” With the spirit of Christmas, even if we are the ones who are struggling in our lives and in need of help, we can still find a way to help others as long as we have strong faith in Christ and do our best to serve God’s kingdom.

Howard Thurman has a poem that says: “When the angels' singing stops, when the stars in the sky disappear, when the kings or doctors go home, when the shepherds go back to care for their flocks, the Ministry of Christmas begins: it is to find the lost, to heal the broken, to feed the hungry, to liberate the imprisoned, to rebuild the home, to bring peace to others, and to let the music of (Christmas) echo in your heart again.”

When we accept the gift of Christmas, that is the incarnation and salvation of Jesus Christ, we become the beloved children of God. When we do our best to share all the gifts that God has given us, we are taking part in the incarnation and salvation of our Lord Christ in this world. When we carry out God’s work at Christmas in our daily life, we are bringing the true light to everyone and making the world a better place with God’s grace and truth.

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.....In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind.....The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.” May God help us to share His gift of Christmas and carry His work at Christmas, so that all God’s people may say “I delight greatly in the Lord; my soul rejoices in my God. For he has clothes me with garments of salvation and arrayed me in a robe of his righteousness, as a bridegroom adorns his head like a priest, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.” And, all places on earth may say “For as the soil makes the sprout come up and a garden causes seeds to grow, so the Sovereign Lord will make righteousness and praise spring up before all nations.” Amen.