

Little Lord Jesus?
A Sermon by the Rev. Scott Herr
First Presbyterian, New Canaan – December 18, 2022

Please Read:
Isaiah 7:10-16
Matthew 1:18-25

We all have an idea about what the “perfect” Christmas is, don’t we? Singing carols on God’s acre! Presents under the tree. All the kids home; mistletoe; chestnuts roasting on the open fire. “I’m dreaming of a white Christmas...” Cards, creches, white or colored lights, we all want a magical Christmas that is beautiful and serene.

And that’s precisely when we must beware! The sentimental mush of "Away in a Manger" and its theologically questionable cooing over the "*little* Lord Jesus" gives the illusion that God’s incarnation into our world was anything but massively disruptive and disorienting beyond anything we can imagine! When I sing “little Lord Jesus,” unfortunately I think of Will Farrell in Talladega Nights and the table grace that begins, “Dear Sweet little baby Jesus...” and it makes me laugh because it so brilliantly and completely trivializes and minimalizes serious faith.

The Gospel lesson begins, "Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way..." and we are reminded from the start that even before he was born, Jesus was causing a disturbance. Joseph, "a righteous man" did not expect to hear that Mary, his betrothed, was pregnant. That was bad enough news as it was. The fact that it was not *his* child made the news even worse. But he didn’t want any trouble, so he planned to divorce her quietly.

As difficult decisions go, Joseph had less than normal sleep, and his slumber was interrupted by no less than *the angel of the Lord* who explained things to him, that even out of this scandalous pregnancy, God was at work...

Joseph, of course, had been afraid of what other people might think. He was afraid of what might happen, fear that a scandal could never be used by God for anything good.

But that’s precisely where Joseph was mistaken. He really should have known better! In Joseph’s own family tree there had been character after character who got caught in scandal, yet beyond scandal God still worked for good. There was Joseph’s namesake, who said to his brothers who had sold him into slavery in Egypt: "You meant it for evil, but God for good!" Then there were

those checkered people from his own bloodline: Rahab, the prostitute; Ruth, that "brazen" Moabite; and King David himself, a royal scoundrel if there ever was one. By now Joseph could not deny it. God had been saving around and in spite of scandals all along. Now it was time for Joseph to put his righteousness to work in God's salvific plan, even if it was scandalous to his neighbors...

This Sweet Little baby Jesus not only stirred up disruption for his parents but threatened no less than complete political and social chaos for those in power. Herod knew. King Herod, the old fox, sitting in Jerusalem with all the military clout of the empire to back him up, knew how dangerous babies can be. Herod knew that he had better take matters into his own hands while he still had time, before the child could mock the impotence of the old man. It was not time to wait for the unknown, potential, growing child to come to fulfillment. With babies, Herod knew, slaughter first, ask questions later...

We fear childish impudence and disrespect in the face of our adult illusions of control. Sherry and I were talking the other day about how you just never know what's going to happen when our children get up front and help lead. Children's sermons make me the most nervous because you honestly have no idea what one of our little darlings will say...

Have you ever wondered why God chose to enter our world as a child? Why it was foretold by the prophets that the savior, Emmanuel, would come as a child? The prophet Isaiah said that the Lord would give a sign in the form of a son born to a young woman, a virgin. And later the prophet goes on to say that this child "shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace. And his authority shall grow continually... He will establish peace, and his kingdom will be established and upheld with justice and righteousness forevermore..." How can this be through a child?

Perhaps the simple answer is that God's ways are (thankfully) not our ways! The advent of the Christ child, like all of God's incarnations, was straight into the nitty-gritty of our lives. God didn't take any short-cuts. God started out to redeem us at just the infantile point where we all began our meandering life journey...

There, especially in the baby, "the hopes and fears of all the years" are met by a God who meets us where we really live - with our pride masquerading as faith, with our false hopes and selfish fears - and claims us. Starting at the

beginning, at the source, our Savior confronts our very deepest and darkest fears, recreating and saving our humanity from the womb onward.

But even this does not adequately describe the mystery we sense at seeing God in the manger. The most disturbing quality of the baby Jesus, the mystery of his advent scandalized even as it inexorably beckons, is the vulnerability of his incarnation.

Nothing is so helpless, so dependent, so fragile and frail as a baby. I know of no other religion so bold as to admit to the possibility of its God appearing in so vulnerable a form. How scandalously condescending is the love of this God who deems to meet us first as a baby. How threatening is this God to my human desire for an all-powerful deity who lives in the realms of the abstract, self-contained ideal, rather than in the stable out back, wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger. For most of the year we preach about humanity's need for God. But as we approach Christmas, can we be so bold as to speak of God's need for humanity - a God who comes, reaching out to us, as a baby, inviting the love, warmth, and nurture of an utterly human family?

With the vulnerability of the babe comes his claim upon us. A baby, because of its vulnerability, dependence, and potential, evokes a response from us, demands a commitment unknown in the majority of human encounters. This claim arises not only because babies need, but also because somewhere within our deepest selves, we know that we need babies. Some deep, human instinct tells us that babies are a sign of our human creativity at its best, a reminder of our dark, biological, primordial origins in the waters of creation and a hopeful hint of our still open future. Call it life. One finds it difficult to be neutral in the face of such smiling, messy mystery.

Did Joseph and Mary feel such a claim upon their lives as they stood by the manger, or did the shepherds, and the magi? Or our new members as we stand together to reaffirm our faith? What is that wonder we feel reflected back upon us when we encounter the Christ child? Is it a glimpse of ourselves at our best, in our primal innocence? Or is it a vision of one who is part of us, yet better than we deserve? Who are those fortunate somebodies who stand around the manger, blessed by so close a love? Who could expect the magi to return home the same way after such a meeting?

That God would begin to save us as a baby was pure genius! But let us remember that it was anything but quiet and peaceful. Even then, as it is today, there is scandal and violence all around. Even a baby is more disruptive and threatening to the status quo than you could ever imagine, especially when he was called to save us from our sins: to incarnate not only God's love, but God's power over sin and evil even in his own flesh upon a cross in the same lifetime. That little child was God's gift to the world...

So, this year, if a messenger in white – a doctor or the angel Gabriel - should give you some disorienting news, I hope you would do as Joseph did... he quietly listened and did as the angel of the Lord commanded...

It didn't seem like much, and we don't hear much more about him, but Joseph did the little, quiet acts of faithfulness. Joseph was a righteous man even to the end, but his righteousness did not stand in the way of God's mercy. Joseph married Mary. And she had the child, just like the prophet foretold. And he came among us, *the real us*, with all of our scandals and wars and brokenness. The child indeed is "Immanuel" - God with us.

So, on this final Sunday in Advent, I invite you to consider again, just what child is this? This Sweet Little Baby Jesus, is really the little Lord Jesus, our Savior. And that's perfect, because we still need mercy and love, grace and truth. We'll sing sweet carols about him, because he still is the disruptive and disorienting, life-changing, universe-transforming "little" Lord Jesus!

In the name of the One who is our Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer. Amen.