

Well, here we are....two days past Christmas, 2020. To use a current political term- today could be called Transition Sunday. This is the Sunday between Christmas, 2020 and the New Year of 2021. This Sunday, Christmas still echoes loudly in our ears and clings softly to our hearts. Let's face it though, it has been a different Christmas for most of us, with gathering of family and friends likely limited or maybe nonexistent. Shopping online or maybe by phone. Adjustment of many traditions, even those of our church. The annual Children's program on December 13, included videos of children other than our own. Our Christmas Eve candlelight service was available to be viewed on computer screens rather than in person.

As we reflect on the year of 2020 that will soon be over, there is no question- it has been an unusual year. It has been a year of COVID-19 pandemic, requiring distancing from others, a year of economic challenges and a year when millions of our fellow Americans have struggled to survive the virus- thousands of them unsuccessfully. As Christians, however, even following months of isolation and caution, it seems if we faithfully try, we can find some joy and hope. If nothing else, joy and hope in the fact that we may now realize what is really most important to us is not material things but our God close beside us as well as our family and friends.

As we stand on the brink of a New Year- as Christians, it seems vital we ask ourselves several questions- Have we truly been renewed by the celebration of the Christ Child? If so, what will we do about it? Or has it been a few weeks of Christmas cards and gifts and houses with bright decorations outside, but now back to the same old isolation and caution?

Can we- from the vantage point of looking backward over this past Christmas time- feel as if we have been renewed and refreshed? Or do we simply pack the Christ Child back into a box to be brought out in all his glory the beginning of Advent, November 2021? Can we leave Christ as a tiny child in the manger to be forgotten until Christmas next year? Should we not see this baby through the eyes of faith- a faith that grows along with the Christ Child? Our faith cannot and must not be fondly looking back to the days of our childhood and the wonderful thing that

happened in Bethlehem long ago, but unrelated to our lives. Are our lives different, at least by a bit?

A young woman remembers- as a child- going with her father to a hospital on Christmas morning as he conducted worship for those who were isolated from family and friends. She recalls her father's passion about the birth story of Jesus and the wonder that filled his eyes when he exclaimed the great power and mystery of God's love. All present were energized by his words- with the exception of one of the charge nurses who was not too happy being stuck with this Christmas shift and its bothersome holiday extras. No flicker of a smile had a chance on her grim lips- no flicker of faith sparkled in her eyes.

The young child approached the "sourpuss" nurse when the service was ended and asked, "Aren't you a Christian?" The nurse responded with professional dignity, "Of course I am!" "Then" said the young girl, "your heart should tell your face!!" So, it should be with us on this first Sunday after Christmas- in spite of our uneasiness and fear for what might lie ahead. If our hearts have truly felt it, our face and actions should surely show it!!

Our Luke 2 scripture account of Jesus being brought to the temple by his parents is interesting because this Year B is the only time it is used in the three year lectionary cycle. If like me, you may have found this account of Simeon and Anna a surprise to be included just after Christmas.

In preparation for this morning, I tried to get my head around its significance other than an additional account of Jesus early life. That led me to remember and reflect on other people found in the Advent scriptures of these past weeks. Just think about them- consider how their faith was evident as a part of Jesus early life.

First of all- Mary – likely just a young woman, but when the angel told her that she would bear the savior of the world- while questioning still- she said, "Here I am, a servant of the Lord. Let it be with me according to your word."

Then Joseph, in spite of questions about the young woman to whom he was engaged when he learned of her pregnancy, believed- through eyes of faith- the angel who told him of the special child that was to be born.

What about the inn keeper? All his rooms were full, but yet he (or possibly his wife) offered the young couple- the young woman obviously pregnant- the warmth of a stable rather than sending them on into the cold. Did he/they feel something was different about this couple?

Then the shepherds, quietly tending their sheep- likely bundled up against the cold night. They are suddenly startled by the angels who appeared lighting up the skies and announcing the birth of the Savior who had been born. Rather than ignore what they had just heard, they followed the star to the stable where the Christ Child was. They worshipped him through eyes of faith and then spread the word by telling everyone they met of the glorious thing that had just happened.

We think of the Wise Men who were experienced in astrology and believed there was special meaning in the bright star they had seen. Through eyes of faith, they traveled for many months to seek the child born as King of the Jews.

Then in our Luke 2 scripture passage this morning, we find Simeon and Anna. In this account of Jesus when he was about six weeks old, we find Mary and Joseph, following the law, bringing their young son to the temple- to their “church” for dedication. The law, given them by God- as stated in Exodus 13 and Numbers 3- required all first-born male children be dedicated to God. There they meet Simeon, an older man who Luke describes as “righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel.” Simeon was someone who was well versed in the promises of a coming Messiah AND, as Luke says- “the Holy Spirit revealed to him that he would not die before he had seen the Lord’s Messiah.” Our scripture also says that, “Guided by the Holy Spirit, Simeon came into the temple...” Led by the Holy Spirit into the temple that day, he saw immediately, through eyes of faith that this was the Messiah. He announced to all who were present that now his own life was fulfilled and he could die in peace.

Then we also find an eighty-four year old woman named Anna- Luke calls her a prophet. Anna lived a contemplative life in the temple- “worshipping there with fasting and prayer night and day.” As soon as she saw the Christ Child, she- through the eyes of faith- began to praise God and spoke about this child as the redeemer of Jerusalem.

Consideration of the collective group of people- each saw and responded with confident eyes of faith? Even Mary and Joseph, with all their questions, still remembered the words of the angel who appeared to both of them. They took upon themselves- with eyes of faith- the responsibility of this new life. How did all these people know? A willing mother, a trusting husband, an inn keeper, simple shepherds, travelers coming a great distance, and then Simeon and Anna. How did their hearts know who Jesus was and then let their face and hands show it?

Based on a clear understanding and reliance of the promises of God, it seems they recognized the baby Jesus through eyes of faith. Maybe that is what has to make the difference for us as well. Confident in God's promises and unfailing love for us, Jesus birth must be seen through the eyes of faith. A gift of love from God. Our actions then indicate what our eyes of faith see.

A story is told of a deacon in a church who, according to the pastor, was doing little as a deacon. One day, the pastor- attempting to get him involved- asked that he take a group of young people to the nursing home where they went once a month to do a worship service. The deacon agreed.

The first time, the deacon was in the back of the room with his arms folded as the kids were doing their thing up front. All of a sudden, someone was tugging at his arm. He looked down and there was an older man in a wheelchair. The deacon took hold of the man's hand and the man held it all during the service. The next month this was repeated. The man in the wheelchair came and held the hand of the deacon month after month.

Then one month, the older man wasn't there. The deacon inquired and was told, "Oh, he's down the hall, right hand side, third door. He's dying. He's unconscious, but if you want to go down and pray over his body that's all right."

The deacon went and found tubes and wires all over the place. He took the man's hand and prayed that God would bless and receive him into eternal glory. As soon as he finished praying, the older man squeezed the deacon's hand and the deacon knew he had been heard. With tears running down his face, he stumbled out of the room and bumped into a woman. She said, "He's been waiting for you. He

said he didn't want to die until he had the chance to hold the hand of Jesus one more time." As it turned out, the older man felt that once a month Jesus came to that place and held his hand for a whole hour. He didn't want to die until he had the chance to hold the hand of Jesus one more time.

Where does this leave us as we have remembered the birth of Jesus these last four weeks? Are we just glad all the fuss is over and we can pack it away for another year? Or do we see the baby anew through eyes of faith and follow his example of kindness and love and caring? How can Christmas be over if we are given the opportunity to be the hand of Jesus to even one person in our midst? Will we follow the child from Bethlehem to the cross and then to the empty tomb? Unless Christmas moves us beyond the manger to the cross on Calvary AND the empty tomb, we have missed the whole meaning of the season. Amen

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