

Sermon on Christmas Day
St. James Episcopal Church
San Francisco, California
December 25, 2007
by The Rev. Mary Moore Gaines

Isaiah 9:2-7; Psalm 96; _Titus 2:11-14; _Luke 2:1-20 _

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. Luke 2: 15-16

It has often been experienced that the story of Jesus' life is an indivisible whole. When we become immersed in one we are led to all the others. Bethlehem leads inevitably to Golgotha, from the crib to the cross.

When Mary brings the baby to the temple for a blessing, the temple priest Simeon prophesies that Mary's soul will be pierced by a sword, and that this child is set for the fall and the resurrection of many. Simeon's prophecy foretells Jesus' passion, the battle between light and darkness that has existed from the beginning of time. We fight this battle every day in ourselves, in our human structures, in the very cosmos.

As beautiful as it is, in the story of the birth of the holy child the crib is always overshadowed by the cross. We can never forget the whole story of this remarkable child. Sadness is mixed with the pain and then the joy of childbirth. The myrrh that the wise man brings will strike an ominous note of mourning.

Almost as soon as Jesus is born, his family is forced to flee the murderous intentions of King Herod. The new life, new light, is quickly confronted with the threat of death, of darkness at its deepest.

The paradox continues: God Almighty comes to us, is known to us, not as a mighty king, a powerful warrior, or even an angry parent, but in the form of a helpless, vulnerable newborn baby. Someone wrote that Jesus is God simplified. God approachable, God understandable, God lovable, God vulnerable . . . Jesus is the face of God.

We see many faces of God in Jesus. What do some of these faces look like?

When the story takes up again, Jesus is a twelve-year old boy traveling with his family and his community to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover in that holy city. His parents can't find him in the crowd. They think he is lost and then they find him sitting in the temple talking with the elders. The elders are amazed by the boy and by his wisdom. He tells his anxious parents, *You shouldn't have worried about me. Can't you see that I am here where I belong, in my Father's house?* As a grown man Jesus would say, *Unless you become like a child you will not see God.*

One face of God we see in Jesus is the wisdom of God which is and always has been seen in the face of a child. The wisdom of God in the face of Jesus.

When we next hear of Jesus he is a man. He responds to the call of John the Baptist and is baptized in the River Jordan. Does he hear the voice from heaven and see the dove descending? Then the wilderness, tempted by Satan for 40 days. He emerges with a mission – to manifest the Kingdom of God on earth. He is affirmed. He is challenged. He commits. The holiness of God in the face of Jesus.

Calling those drawn to him to follow, he begins his magnificent ministry - to the halt and the lame, the hungry and the diseased, the poor and the disenfranchised. He breaks bread with sinners, accepts women as equals, has hard words to say to those who cleave to too much ritual and to those who are not open hearted and generous. *Whenever you did it to one of the least of these, you did it also to me.* God the prophet in the face of Jesus.

Finally, his journey to Jerusalem to meet his fate. When he is arrested most of his disciples abandon him. Then swiftly, trial, crucifixion, death. Even in death, forgiveness. *Forgive them Father for they know not what they do.* The suffering, the compassionate, God in the face of Jesus.

Jesus, the wisdom of God. Jesus, the holy man, the prophet, the compassionate forgiver.

This is all to come.

Today, like Mary, it is well to rest after the labor of childbirth, to celebrate the miracle of new birth, to remember with Mary the angel who told her that she would conceive and bear a son that will be named Jesus. What was it the angel said again? *Jesus. . . will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.*

Now here he is, this tiny babe. Mary is wondering what his destiny will be. Stay in this place for a while. Yes, it is a dirty old barn, but they are all safe and warm. The birth pains are over, the child is safely born. The shepherds are following the star to the holy child. The wise men from the East are preparing to set out with their gifts. Today is his birthday, this Jesus whom we celebrate.

This is quite enough for today. Bask in the glory of these first moments of his life on this Christmas Day. Celebrate and give thanks on all twelve days of Christmas and the whole year through.

For unto us a child is born. Unto us a Son is given.