

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
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Christmas Is for Adults

John 1:1-18

Christmas can be an exciting and uplifting time for people of all ages. But there's something about children that makes their response to the season even more energetic. No doubt, anticipating the arrival of Christmas presents is a big part of it. I was hoping for some post-Christmas enthusiasm earlier this week when the children in our day care center gathered with me for weekly worship. But when the three-year-olds arrived, energy was low, and they were slumping in the pew. That was until I asked them to tell me one thing they got for Christmas. Eyes widened and hands shot up. Then came a litany of toys, games, and devices, everything from fire trucks to unicorn dolls. I wrapped it all up by telling them I had gotten a new pair of jeans. They didn't seem too thrilled by that.

Glen Campbell sang: "Christmas is for children, Just for children, Grownups say / Santa's found the chimney, That's for children, Like the reindeer and the sleigh / That same tale is told, Every Christmas Eve again / We may think we're old, But our hearts can almost believe again / Christmas is for children, But aren't we all children, Christmas day." Maybe so, you may say, but Christmas day has come and gone, and all of us who were kids at heart on December 25 are now back to being adults.

And yet today's Scripture passage from John still wants to talk about Christmas and children. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (v. 1). This Word "became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth" (v. 14). A lot of ink has been spilled by many people trying to interpret and explain what the Gospel of John means by describing Jesus as "the Word." Essentially, it has to do with how Jesus reveals God to the world. The Word is God's self-expression, God's self-revelation. And now, in Jesus, the Word has become flesh. The Word doesn't stay outside of time and history, but enters into the time-bound world in which we live, in human form. Though the Gospel of John doesn't open with Mary and Joseph at the manger, or shepherds in the field, or wise men on their way to Jerusalem, it's just as much about the truth of Christmas, namely, God's coming into the world for our salvation.

And God's purpose for showing up and being available in the form of Jesus is to open the way for a new relationship with us. Those who believe by accepting God's revelation of himself in Jesus become new people and enter into a new life with God. One of John's primary ways of talking about this new life with God is through the language of children and family. "Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God" (v. 12).

So Christmas, in the deepest theological sense, really is about children. Not simply children as very young human beings whose level of enthusiasm rises during the holidays, and who are eager to tell you what Santa left under their tree. But more importantly, children as individuals, of various ages, who accept the Word named Jesus and experience the life and light that this Word offers. John describes these kind of children as "born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God" (v. 13). In other words, the things within that culture that would normally figure into one's status as a child

of God—the husband’s decision, human sexual desire, natural descent, have no avail. The birth that matters most comes from above, leaving heritage and race irrelevant.

We encounter this theme a couple of chapters later when Jesus engages Nicodemus in a conversation about being born from above, or born again. By telling us the story of Nicodemus’s meeting with Jesus, John wants us to understand that while personal change is important, the source of that change is what matters most. The Greek word often translated as born “again” or “anew” has a double meaning. It also means born “from above.” In other words, new birth is important, but equally important is where that birth comes from, where that birth is generated. It’s not generated by you, but from beyond you. This transformation isn’t something you do. It’s something God does. Being a child of God means that when it comes to eternal life, you’re brought into being by God.

Earlier this week, I was walking down the hallway when one of our day care children called me aside and declared, “I came here as a baby.” Since I knew that we don’t provide infant care in our center, I probed a little further, and discovered that she was actually talking about how she got into this world in the first place. “I came here as a baby.” She went on to talk about, and provide a visual demonstration, of how she had been jumping around in her mommy’s tummy prior to birth.

“I came here as a baby.” That’s true for all of us, not only in the physical, biological sense, but in a spiritual sense as well. Becoming a child of God through faith in Jesus Christ requires God bringing you into existence, bringing you forth from the womb as a son or daughter within the family of God, the community of God’s people.

And this isn’t a smooth, clean, pain-free process. Birth never is. Birth is hard and messy. In our modern setting, we may not think about this as much, especially since most births happen in hospitals, away from the eyes of a broader population. But as Beth Stovell has pointed out, in biblical times, things were different. “In the ancient world,” she says, “birth was an experience that impacted everyone. It happened inside homes that made the noise and struggle much more public. Neighbors heard it. Birth, in all of its loud messiness, was a family affair and even a community event.”¹

I wonder about others who were nearby, who may have heard Mary when she was giving birth to Jesus. If you still have some Christmas cards you received, lying around the house, take a close look at how some of them depict Mary. She usually looks pretty serene and refreshed. If it weren’t for the baby Jesus lying in the manger, you might not think about what she’s just been through in the birthing process. Our Christmas items often give us a sanitized portrayal of the Savior’s arrival. We lose sight of the labor, the struggle, the pain, the blood, the messiness of God’s coming into the world to redeem us.

As with birth, so with rebirth. It too is hard and messy. We shouldn’t expect our new life in Christ to be instantaneous and painless. On the contrary, becoming a child of God involves continual struggle. The process of moving from spiritual infancy to spiritual maturity is tough. Coming to faith in Christ is one thing. Making progress in faith, and growing up in Christ, is another.

One of the characters who usually shows up during Christmas is Peter Pan. Recall that he’s the personification of the phrase, “I’ll never grow up.” And he never does. At one point in a film version of the story, Wendy, who has fallen in love with Peter, confronts him about his pursuit of play and his refusal to become an adult. As Tinkerbell and Captain Hook listen in on the dialogue, Wendy asks:

“Peter, what are your real feelings?”

"Feelings?" he asks.

"What do you feel? Happiness? Sadness? Jealousy? Anger? Love?"

"Love? I have never heard of it."

"I think you have, Peter. I daresay you've felt it yourself . . . for something, or someone."

"Never. Even the sound of it offends me."

Wendy reaches for Peter in a loving gesture, and suddenly he runs away, shouting, "Why do you spoil everything? We have fun, don't we? I taught you to fight and to fly. What more could there be?"

"There is so much more," she answers.

"What? What else is there?"

"I don't know. I think it becomes clearer when you grow up."

"Well, I will not grow up! You cannot make me! Go home and grow up. And take your feelings with you."²

Peter Pan resists the kinds of emotions and responsibilities that come with adulthood. Instead, he's committed to the fun, playfulness, and imagination that come with childhood. This is part of the nature of Never Never Land, the faraway place where he lives. In a song named after that place, Peter sings: "You'll have a treasure if you stay there, / More precious far than gold. / For once you have found your way there, / You can never, never grow old."

Growing older. Growing up. These too are part of what it means to be a child of God, a child born of God. Born into the family of God called the church. The church is no Never Never Land where you can live in eternal childhood. It's a community where new birth leads into new life, and new life requires growing up into the commitments and responsibilities of spiritual adulthood. I like the way that preacher Fleming Rutledge puts it when she says, "Maturing as a Christian means making sacrifices, delaying gratification, setting the needs of others ahead of one's own, pursuing distant goals instead of temptations ready at hand."³

In order to do these kinds of things, we need the church, the family of God where we can be birthed, nourished, taught, trained, corrected, shaped, transformed, and loved into Christian adulthood. True, if you're a believer, you're a Christmas baby. God sent his Son into the world, the Word became flesh, to make it possible for you to become a child of God. But that requires not only birth from above but also growth from above. Christmas isn't just for children. Christmas is for adults. Its ultimate aim is spiritual development that leads to maturity in Christ. Remember that as the Gospel of John unfolds, we see more and more of what it means to be the children of God. Today's text is just the beginning of a story that takes us through Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, where our risen Lord certifies our identity by sending Mary Magdalene to tell his "brothers" (i.e., the disciples), "I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God" (20:17).

During last Sunday's service, we spent time remembering and reflecting on God's faithfulness during the year that has concluded. Today, we're two weeks into the new year, which gives each of us a good opportunity to consider the path forward toward greater spiritual maturity. So ask the Father to help you see the areas where you as his child need to make more progress in the life of faith. Search yourself to see where you're slow to move out of spiritual infancy. Pray for the light and power of the Spirit to discern where and how you need to keep growing up in the new life opened up by the Son.

¹ Beth Stovell, "We Need to Take Jesus' Metaphor of Being Born Again More Seriously." Christianity Today website. October 20, 2017. Accessed January 9, 2020 < <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2017/november/we-need-to-take-jesus-metaphor-of-being-born-again-more-ser.html> >.

² *Peter Pan*. Directed by P. J. Hogan. Based on the novel by J. M. Barrie. Written by P. J. Hogan and Michael Goldenberg. Universal Pictures, 2003 <<https://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2004/august/15482.html>>.

³ Fleming Rutledge, *Advent: The Once and Future Coming of Jesus Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018) 49.