

The people who assemble here on Christmas Eve are always interesting. Many of the church's regular worshippers have traveled elsewhere and maybe are worshipping with their families there. Others have traveled here from far off places - a once a year pilgrimage to be with family. Of course many people only attend worship on Christmas Eve. And so that brings up the question, what made you come here tonight?

The answers that first pop into our heads are many and varied. For some it is a time to worship with family. For others it is a tradition, the thing you do on Christmas Eve. I suppose some see it as a once a year time to get in good with God, and hope it is good enough. Some who dare to be honest with God will say they're here because they have to be - their parents or spouse dragged them here against their will. They find it's easier to be here for an hour than to put up with a year's worth of nagging for not coming. Maybe for the righteous among us it is a time to give thanks to God for coming in human form.

Underneath all of these things I think there is something deeper, and it probably goes for all of us. I think I can get at it by reading the opening verses of Psalm 78. They go:

Listen, my people,

mark each word.

I begin with a story,

I speak of mysteries

welling up from ancient depths,

heard and known from our elders.

We must not hide

this story from our children

but tell the mighty works

and all the wonders of God.

Psalm 78 is attributed to a man named Asaph who wrote it some 3000 years ago. Listen to Asaph's 3000 year old words again (Repeat verses).

Though that psalm was written 1000 years before Jesus was born its words fit what we gather here to celebrate tonight - the works of God that shape everything in our lives; and who we understand ourselves to be.

If we were to critically dissect the Christmas story - with its angels and star and a virgin giving birth - it comes off sounding pretty unbelievable. It seems to come from a fairy tale world, yet it demands to be treated as reality. Indeed any scientifically minded adult would have a hard time answering a little kid who came up and asked, "Did it really happen that way?"

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The story is true.

Many of our academic pursuits seek to find and discover - control and limit, bring things of this world into the grasp of our human intellects. Our academic pursuits can be very constructive and yield lots of information.

Yet there is an ancient wisdom to our existence that defies all attempts to define it. The birth and life of Jesus is the centerpiece of that wisdom. We will soon read the opening words from the Gospel of John by candlelight, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God."

Why did you come here tonight?

I'm told that 81% of people now reject the accounts of Jesus' birth and believe they are untrue. If that's accurate then four out of five people here don't believe the core message of this holiday.

Yet you're still here. You're here because it is the deepest need of your heart to beat with the rhythm of the mysteries welling up from ancient depths. To miss Christmas Eve is to miss something essential to yourself. To miss Christmas Eve is to somehow lose the Truth that has been handed to you from your elders; and the Truth that is a necessary part of your life to hand it on to children. You came because something of yourself is missing without it.

I wonder how many people would believe the account of Jesus' birth if we got rid of all the wrappings we put around it which ultimately hide its truth? We've made it into a sweet baby story where the only interruption is maybe a lamb's bleating.

My one colleague, the Rev. Aileen Robbins says this Christmas is going to be different for her. Earlier this year a

young pregnant woman in her congregation asked her to be present when she gave birth. There's a long back story but basically this woman is alone in the world - no family, very few friends; and she didn't want it to be just herself and the medical staff when she gave birth. So she asked her pastor to be there. Aileen says that after giving birth to her two children she thought she had a pretty good sense of what giving birth was like. But as it was happening she realized that this was the first time she was at the foot end of the bed. She was not really ready for just how foul, disgusting and bloody it really was.

She says that for God to truly be born into the world that way is scandalous. God entered the world in that traumatic and disgusting way!?! God was not quietly born into a barn with clean straw to adoring parents, and then shortly thereafter visited by clean-cut shepherds who oohed and ahhhed at the pink little baby.

God was born into filth, so that God could know you. Weak, helpless, messy - that is the deep truth of the Christmas story. Whether or not you accept or reject the details of the Bible's

accounts is largely irrelevant. I think deep inside each and every one of us there lies a fear - a fear of not being good enough. A fear that some foul corner of our nature makes us unlovable. The birth -and in time, the death- of Jesus reveal something essential to that deep inner fear. There is no foulness, no filth, no failure, no sin so great that it can frighten God away.

What is the Christmas story really asking you to believe? It has nothing to do with stars and wise men and virgins giving birth. It is that a chapter of the history of this world has God's presence as a human directly written into it. You cannot change the past. You cannot change the Christmas story. You cannot escape God's love.

Christmas is an ancient story that reveals to us *our value and our purpose*. It makes a connection between us and the forces which created us, sustain us, and which will save us forever. Christmas gives your life's story an eternity.

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Amen