

“In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria. And all went to be registered, each to his own town. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear. And the angel said to them, “Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.” And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!” When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us.” And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart. And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.”

Dear Friends in Christ, and fellow redeemed:

For most people, today is a thrilling, wonderful, exciting day. It is a day in which gifts are exchanged, when families come together, when friends wish each other Christmas joy. Tomorrow, though, may be a big let-down. In fact, it's already come for some. I can guarantee you that some stores have already taken down their festive decorations. A local radio station that has been playing non-stop Christmas music since December 1st will stop playing Christmas music tomorrow, or at least they have in the past. Yes, the world's so-called Christmas is soon over. Much of what we have seen and heard was all for effect, the effect of buying and selling, of giving in order to be getting.

How will you celebrate this blessed Christmas Day—and the joyous days that are to come in its aftermath? I submit there is only one way to celebrate Christmas: “As a little child.” Our text is the well-beloved Christmas Gospel. In it, one point is repeated several times: a baby—a son—a child. God in his majesty and might could have chosen to dazzle us with His omnipotent power in some spectacular fashion. Instead He chose to reveal Himself as a lowly babe in a manger. There is Christmas only because a Child came—not just any Child, but the Eternal God condescends to be born in human flesh. As God became a child, so we must become childlike in faith and joy. As we come to this celebration of Christmas, let us do it as we learn from the Child; as we learn as a child; and as we witness to the Child.

Why is this child-like faith so important? Sometimes *“a little child shall lead them.”* (Isaiah 11:6, ESV) A child told a military captain that he could be healed of his leprosy. A child was called to our Lord's knee to show the stature one needs to have to enter the door of his kingdom. A child brought the bread and fish which our Lord used to feed the multitude. God revealed himself to us through a Son—the Child, Christ the Lord—who fulfilled the promise made through Isaiah: *“For to us a child is born, to us a son is given”* (Isaiah 9:6, ESV)

When we see this Babe *wrapped... in swaddling cloths and laid...in a manger*, we may forget that He is the Almighty God. But when we hear a heavenly host of angels proclaiming Him to be so, then the Spirit moves us to confess, “Surely it can be no other than the Son of God!” But many people are not ready to receive God “as a little child.” Many people on that first Christmas night were not. Camped around Jerusalem were the Roman legions, none of whom could be accused of being child-like. It was Christmas Day there too, but it was only the shepherds in the fields who enjoyed the angel's Christmas carol. It was Christmas Day in Herod's palace, but the Saviour was born in a lowly stable and to a humble virgin named Mary. In Athens were the wise men of Greece, but they saw no star. It appeared to others, to wise men with childlike faith, who longed to see the Light of the world. It is Christmas, but many are still unwilling to learn from a child—to learn of the Child who is the hope of the ages and the Saviour of all mankind.

Are you ready to celebrate Christmas as a little child? Will you get down on your knees before the manger and stoop down to the level of a child so you can have the proper perspective from which alone you can see this miracle in a manger? In one playground in Chicago, small children enter a “tiny tot play lot” through a low gateway shaped like a keyhole. Admittance to this playground depends on the ability of the child to walk upright through the low gate. In other words, their size is their ticket. Your size, too—the size of your ego—determines whether or not you can have Christmas and the kingdom of heaven this lowly Baby would bring you. Remember what Jesus said to his prideful disciples: **“Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it.”** (Luke 18:17, ESV)

We need the simplicity and trust of a child-like faith to say, “I am a sinner. I daily fall short of what God expects of me. I don't deserve God's mercy and forgiveness. But I have a Saviour, who gave His life in my place on the cross, and who rose from the dead so that I, too, will rise. I can't understand all the mystery and wonder of Christmas or how God's salvation can come this way. But I can believe it. This baby Jesus, is my Saviour from sin and the Saviour of the whole world.

What burdens your heart this day? What fear or sorrow keeps you from the great joy of which the angels sang? Again, let us learn from a little child. Our teacher is a 6-year-old girl named Becky. Becky's home life gave little about which she could be joyful. Her father, an alcoholic, spent little time at home; and when he was there, he and her mother spent much of their time yelling at each other. Becky would run to hide in her bedroom for hours. Becky liked Sunday school, though—especially practice for the children's Christmas program. She was a sheep; no speaking part—not for quiet, introverted Becky. One Sunday, when practice in the parish hall was over and the children had returned to their Sunday school rooms, Becky's teacher found her still in the parish hall, sitting on the floor next to the manger. She had taken the Jesus doll out of the manger and was holding it tightly in her arms. She was singing “Jesus Loves Me.” Becky had found a moment of great joy amid the pain in her life. The answer to our failures and imperfections, too, is found in the perfection of Jesus Christ, the source of our celebration.

Or I think of the little girl who has been enamoured with my Christmas lights. She is 2 or 3 years old and goes for a walk with her mother and brother each day. I saw her on my lawn one day, looking at a bright tree that was just about her size. I went and waved to her, and her mother hastily said, “I'll make sure she doesn't damage anything.” I said I was happy she was enjoying the lights. I would see new footprints in the snow each day, going up to the tree. But I have another decoration that suddenly caught her attention. It is a scene of Mary and Joseph and the Baby Jesus. When I put it up, the lights wouldn't work, and I realized the whole string was burned out. It isn't really replaceable, but I managed to get out the old string, and worked a new string of lights into the closed frame. The first day it was lit up, I saw that the footprints moved pass the tree and up to the porch, where the manger scene is. I don't know if the family goes to church. I don't know if the little girl knew anything about the Baby. But what a joy it is to see the child-like innocence that enjoys the lights and the picture of the Christ-Child.

Do you still have a child-like faith such as this? Do you come as a child on this blessed Christmas Day to see the Child in the manger? To rephrase Jesus' words, “Whoever receives the kingdom of God like a child will enter it.”

Now we, who by the Holy Spirit's power, have the faith of a child in the Child of Bethlehem will want to witness to the Child. The angels told the shepherds about God's gift, and we are told: ***And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them.*** Do you, no matter how many Christmases you have celebrated, still follow the child-like example of the shepherds in our text and tell those with whom you work and live about this child? A little girl was about to undergo a dangerous operation. Just before the doctor administered the anaesthetic, he said to her, “Before we can make you well, we must put you to sleep.” The girl responded, “Oh, if you are going to put me to sleep, then I must say my prayers first.” She folded her hands, closed her eyes, and said, “Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep. If I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take. And this I ask for Jesus' sake. Amen” Later on the surgeon admitted that he prayed that night for the first time in 30 years. This child's witness was stronger than the surgeon's indifference. Her witness melted his heart.

Only as you witness to this Child with the unabashed simplicity of faith of the “little ones” of the kingdom of God can you celebrate Christmas. This very day, in David's town, your Saviour is born—Christ the Lord!

So come again—as you have since you were a child, ever since you were baptized—and cradle this Babe in your heart. Praise God for His gift as the shepherds did, for this Child gave Himself on the cross for your sins and rose victoriously over death and the grave to lead you to the joy of eternity in the bosom of the Father. By the power of the Holy Spirit make a Christmas gift of yourself as you tell others how Christmas has brought you eternal salvation through this wondrous Child. Tell them of the Christ-child who was born to save them, too. As you leave today I pray that you may go through our church doors smaller

in stature but greater in faith than when you came in. “A very blessed Christmas—in the name of the Christ Child.” Amen.