

“Through the Eyes of Children”

Luke 2:1-20

Dr. Christopher C. F. Chapman

First Baptist Church, Raleigh

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Seeing the world through the eyes of children can be wonderful. When we had our Sunday morning meeting a week ago, Jennings joined us for part of the time. Since he was very young, he has attended some staff meetings, and is usually the best behaved of all of us. This was no exception, and he added life to our meeting when he walked over to the Bobblehead Grinch at the corner of my desk (Thank-you, Nancy Phillips!) and was fascinated by him. He looked at the Grinch bobbling his head back and forth, smiled with eyes wide, picked him up, and said repeatedly, “Whoa! Whoa!” I suggested that perhaps he should take the Grinch, with his ticking sound, to his Mom’s office, but she disagreed.

Seeing the world through the eyes of children can be wonderful, but it can also be challenging because of their honesty. I learned a long time ago to be careful when asking children questions, especially as part of a children’s sermon. In one setting, before my time there, the minister was talking about the church’s calling to welcome everyone. So, he asked the children if someone who couldn’t afford nice clothes would be welcome. Most of the children said, “Yes,” but one child said, “No!” The minister pressed the child gently, thinking this would help. “No,” the child said, “If they are not dressed like us, they cannot come.” The child’s parents, who were always dressed to the nines with every hair in place, cringed because everyone knew why the child responded this way.

But it’s not just that children answer questions honestly, in terms of their own experience and upbringing; it’s that they ask difficult yet equally honest questions. When my mentor’s son was very young, he asked his father, “Daddy, did the ark really hold two of every kind of animal in the world?” Hearing this morning’s Gospel reading about Gabriel’s appearance to Mary, a young child paying attention might ask a parent what the Bible means when it says that Mary was a v ____? I won’t say the “v” word here so as to save parents any further stress...

Children are open and inquisitive and thus full of wonder, and they are painfully honest about everything, including biblical stories and matters of faith. Yet, in the end, this is all a gift, and not just for them, because we need to retain a sense of wonder, and we need to ask honest questions about life in general and our faith. And all of this applies to the story we have read from Luke 2. It is so familiar that we may think we have run out of questions to ask and are beyond the place where we can be awed, but on both counts we would be wrong.

If we see this story through the eyes of children, there are plenty of questions to ask, beginning with - did it really happen like this, a young woman had a baby, without... and God was involved? You may wonder if we can ask this question here. We do, whether we say it out-loud or not, and it's not a crazy question nor is it a sign that we are heathens.

Two canonical Gospels – Matthew and Luke – have birth narratives while two - Mark and John - do not. Apparently, the latter two writers did not think all these details were essential to Christian faith. The birth narratives address the question, “How did the Creator of the universe take on human flesh? How was God in Christ? How could God fully enter the life of a single creature?” Matthew and Luke address this question in poetic beauty, but they don't answer it in precise biological terms, thank God! It is OK to ask the question.

If we see this story through the eyes of children, we will also ask about the angels. What do they look like? Do they really have wings and halos? Are they good singers? Would Warren give them a solo? What do they like to eat? What would they like for Christmas?

We will also ask about the shepherds. How many sheep do they have? Where are they now? Did they bring them with them? If not, who is looking after them? Are the sheep OK? Are their sheep in the animal shelter with the baby Jesus?

And how about the baby Jesus, is he OK? Is he warm enough? Is he frightened by all the commotion? And what does it mean that Mary treasured all these things and pondered them in her heart? What does that mean? Is it what we should do? All these questions are OK to ask. They don't threaten God or our faith, and whether we can document the historicity of this event or not, the details in the story matter.

Angels are messengers of God. If we think they are an animated form of what we see in classical art, we may miss some real-world angels who are more like Clarence in “It’s a Wonderful Life”. Shepherds look after sheep and where they are matters. Seeing them as real figures sharpens our focus on the message – that God comes for all. And if Jesus is a real baby, born in rough circumstances, we need to pay attention to the roughness. It is part of the story. It tells us something.

If we see this story through the eyes of children, there are plenty of questions to ask, all of which benefit us, and there is plenty of wonder to observe and ponder with Mary. The birth of every child inspires awe. So many things can go wrong. Life is so fragile, especially human life. And when you factor in the time, the lack of medical understanding, the added challenges of this birth, it is a miracle! The story of salvation might just as easily have come to a grinding halt before it began. But it didn’t. “Whoa!” as Jennings would say.

The message of this story also inspires awe and wonder. It is a message about the Creator of the whole world coming to dwell with us in love. Perhaps God was always here, and we just didn’t know it. And God has always loved us; we just didn’t believe it. But this story boldly underscores something we desperately need to know – we are loved and accepted as we are; God is with us and for us!

It is also a message about God’s willingness to get God’s hands and feet dirty. God does not choose to join us at a place of privilege and status. God enters the simplest and messiest of circumstances – childbirth in an animal shed! God is where the action is, with the poor and outcast. God is willing to risk it all for us; indeed, in the end, God gives all for us. If that doesn’t inspire us to say, “Whoa!” nothing will.

Theologian Karl Barth was once asked to summarize his theology in a single sentence. Rather than referencing any of his extensive writing, he noted something he learned at his mother’s knee, saying, “Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so.” Some of the most profound truths are also the simplest, and so what we need is not sophisticated insight but a willingness to see through the eyes of children, with an openness to wonder and a willingness to ask questions. Such is the case with the profound truths of this sacred eve.