

Christmas Changes Everything

Merry Christmas!

To the extent that a sermon needs a title, tonight's headline was going to be *Everything Changes*; but then I heard a voice, maybe yours, saying, "Oh, please: tell us something we don't already know!" You're right: we have been living with a lot of changes in the last few years—some making us dizzy and disoriented, others dictating change in our way of living, and some provoking fear. In the midst of such sobering reality, here we are tonight, celebrating as a way of getting our bearings. Yes, we need a little Christmas, right this very minute. So, in keeping with the feeling, tonight's revised sermon title is *Christmas Changes Everything*. However, this is about more than a 'little Christmas' right now. We need a really big Christmas over the long haul—not the Christmases of 'Christmas is for children' but a grownup adult Christmas: a commitment to be available, to be with Jesus from infancy through adulthood.

Christmas Changes Everything; yet one needs to be sensitive to the changes happening along the way. Before this night ever took place, before it could take place, Mary hears a voice. Angel Gabriel encourages her not to be afraid in learning that she would conceive and bear the Son of God. She responds, "I am the Lord's servant. Let it be with me as God asks and

promises.” Mary fears not the approach of God nor the reproach and scorn of her people’s talk and treatment over her being pregnant. She puts shame away in making herself available to God, the God who has mercy on those who heed the divine call from generation to generation; the God who scatters the proud with their vain imaginings—those pretenders to thrones and all manner of reserved seating who seek nothing but power. To the God who has come to the help of the people in the past—lifting up the lowly and feeding the hungry—Mary commits herself, vowing “I will do whatever I can to make God’s promise real in the present, and forever.”

Joseph heard a voice too, and was no less startled about the word of a child being on the way. Wishing not to heighten the village gossip, Joseph planned to dismiss the girl quietly because he did not want to expose her to ridicule. However, just when he had resolved to divorce Mary, an angelic messenger spoke to him in a dream, asking him to pause and consider that this child is from God. Again, “Don’t be afraid,” the angel says. “This child will save the people from their sins. Take Mary as your wife. You will name her boy Jesus. Other people will call him Emmanuel—God is with us.”

When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did not try to shake off his crazy dream. Instead of putting Mary away, he put aside his personal reservations about her story as well as his social privilege to be done with her and did as the

Lord commanded. By his action, Joseph, like Mary, vowed to be a partner in God's plan.

Christmas is at the heart of God's plan and Christmas changes everything. Christmas is not an extraordinary moment, fleeting then fading away. Neither is Christmas an ordinary moment like any other, as if a mirage of false hope in the drudgery of frozen sameness. Rather, Christmas reminds us that each and every moment is the conceptional moment that changes everything. Our Christmas Celebration is a reminder that who God is is what God is always doing. God is always coming to us; God is always with us.

Christmas changes everything. Joseph gives up his prerogative. Mary does not allow ridicule to make her shy away. Even the Magi, those esoteric researchers of cosmic inscrutability, hear and follow a voice's prompting such that their journey brings them to a palpable God's human possibility. Shepherds, too, who are never heard from, for they are always away in the hills tending the flocks, even shepherds hear voices and then give voice themselves, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen.

Yes, Christmas changes everything; but that doesn't mean we have a *Miracle on Bethlehem Street* or a classic tale of *A Wonderful Life* with the God Bless Us Everyone happy ending of a goose dinner. Those are

wonderful and poignant holiday stories. However, what we have here in Christmas is the Gospel's telling that ruthless rulers are still sacrificing wholly innocent children, that dislocated families are taking flight, crossing borders, in a frantic search for refuge. Then and now, authorities are willing to balance government upon the shoulders of the people most in need; then and now—expending more on war than health and education. Still, in the middle of this all: Immanuel—God is with us.

Christmas is the conceptional moment that changes everything. This is why we have come all ye faithful: to worship and adore him. And what we do in our worship affects what we can do with our lives. “Sing to the Lord and bless God's name; proclaim the good news ... declare God's wonders among all peoples” (Psalm 96:2-3). Our worship forms and celebrates our vow, our bond to God and with each other. Our worship makes us more sensitive to hearing the angels sing, “Do not be afraid ... Glory to God and peace among all God's people.” Therefore, friends, as did Mary and Joseph, let us hear the angel voicing the divine request, God asking “Will you help me, please?” Listen also for voices of promise, be they heralds in the skies or messengers in dreams, giving directions, issuing warnings or offering reassurances. However you hear it, we are being reminded that the same God who requests our help and participation, makes and keeps the divine

promise to be with us here, helping us. Conceive of such possibility; bear the reality of God with us. Christmas changes everything. In and through the Incarnation, God's word becomes flesh in Jesus. Through Jesus Christ, our flesh and blood lives God's word. O come, let us adore him. Let us raise up this child in our world today. And for tonight, as you approach the Christ and bend the knee, let him hear your voice saying, "I am here. I will do whatever I can to help make God's promise real in the present and forever." Amen.

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