

**Born In Us Today
Luke 2:1-20**

**John W. Vest
Christmas Eve 2010
Fourth Presbyterian Church**

As a young parent, I'm beginning to understand that our perspective on Christmas varies widely depending on our life circumstances. For some of us, Christmas is full of magic and wonder. For some of us, Christmas is lonely and sad. For some of us, Christmas is hectic and stressful. For some of us, Christmas is quiet and peaceful. As a pastor, I've appreciated this diversity of experience for some time, but now I'm living it in a way I never have before.

Two years ago, my wife and I were eagerly awaiting the birth of our son, who was born on January 5. That Christmas was full of hope and expectation. For me, as I sat in this sanctuary on Christmas Eve listening to the story of Jesus' birth, I pondered how the birth of my own son would change the way I think about the birth of Jesus. For my wife, Christmas was mostly uncomfortable and exhausting.

Last year, our almost one year old son wasn't really sure what to do with Christmas. He was mostly bewildered and puzzled by the whole thing—the lights, the presents, the anemic and disappointing Santa Claus at Macy's, the long drive south to visit my family. Truth be told, he was more focused on learning how to walk than anything having to do with Christmas. And, true to form, he was definitely more interested in the boxes that his presents came in than the presents themselves.

This year, our almost two year old son is experiencing Christmas in an entirely different way and it is fascinating to rediscover Christmas through his eyes. His face lit up when we brought a real Christmas tree into our home. He is quite interested in the decorations,

especially Daddy's *Star Trek* and Elvis Presley ornaments that make funny sounds, and the little rocking horse that reminds him of his own rocking horse. Santa Claus is no longer a scary man in a red suit; now he is the jolly old bringer of presents that had better deliver a bus tomorrow morning, by far my son's most favorite thing in the world right now. He has learned that Christmas treats taste much better than normal food, and he's in non-stop play mode with his grandparents and aunt in town to visit.

In fact, our home is turning into the setup for a holiday comedy. Our small two bedroom condo, maybe 1100 square feet, which at times feels barely big enough for two adults, a toddler, and a basset hound, has also hosted two additional adults and two more dogs for the past several days. On top of this, I think my parents are going to join us tonight in order to experience an early Christmas morning with our son, bringing us way past capacity. It's hard not feeling like Clark Griswold in *National Lampoon's Christmas Vacation*. The only thing missing is for my in-laws to park out on the street in their pop-up RV (with a fourth dog, no less) to play the role of Uncle Eddie. Really, it's just a matter of time before our tree catches on fire and someone kidnaps my boss. If John Buchanan turns up missing from the 8:30 or 11:00 services, you might want to check the Vest home.

Christmas Vacation is probably my favorite Christmas movie. I've seen it countless times, yet it never gets old or stops being funny. I think it is so successful as a holiday movie because it perfectly captures and caricatures the struggles and conflicts every family experiences during this season—the stresses of preparing for Christmas, spending money you don't have, the chaos that erupts despite diligent planning, the clash of holiday expectations, the unpredictability of family visits. Clark Griswold helps us deal with these conflicts by taking

them all upon himself and somehow managing to survive, making us laugh at him—and ourselves—in the process.

But not all of the conflicts in the world this evening are so benign, or so easily dismissed with a parody and a laugh. For those who have been hit the hardest by our struggling economy, those who have lost another job or who have yet to find one, the gap between their situation and the excesses of Christmas is no laughing matter. Our city remains as divided as ever by geography, race, economics, and religion. Families are strained or divided beyond repair. On the other side of the world, instability and fear still reign in Iraq. A war still rages in Afghanistan. A war is brewing on the Korean peninsula. Tension and violence is escalating in the Holy Land. And every traveler who passes through an airport security check is reminded of the hidden conflict we continue to live with.

Throughout the world, people are in desperate need of reconciliation.

Reconciliation is a concept I have thought about a lot over the past few years. A mission trip to learn about the Troubles of Northern Ireland and efforts at peacemaking and reconciliation changed the way I think about our world. A follow-up trip through civil rights history in the American south and sustained reflection on the deep divisions of Chicago bring this concern for reconciliation closer to home. As a pastor, I regularly see individuals and families crying out for reconciliation. In the conflicted land of Jesus' birth, we wonder if reconciliation is even possible.

Yet it is this very birth that gives us hope for reconciliation in all of these situations, and many more.

Theologically, when we talk about reconciliation we usually think about Holy Week and Easter, the drama of Jesus' death and resurrection. These are the events in which Paul and many of the early Christians most clearly recognized God's work of reconciliation in the world. In fact, neither Paul nor Mark, the first of our gospels to be written, mention a single thing about Jesus' birth. It was evidently not that important to them or to their theology.

Indeed, while Christmas has clearly become the more popular Christian holy day, it is said that Easter is in fact the most important celebration of our religious year. Yet to this day, how we interpret those events is one of the most theologically contentious issues in the church. Some Christians are fixated on the blood of Jesus while others avoid it at all costs. And however you understand it, the mechanics of *how* Jesus' death and resurrection reconcile us to God and each other is difficult to comprehend, especially since the New Testament itself explains it in several different ways. It is a mystery that confounds and divides us.

So I was intrigued a month ago, while we sang Christmas carols on the steps of the church before the beginning of the Magnificent Mile Lights Festival, to hear with new ears—ears attuned to cries for reconciliation—the line from “Hark! The Herald Angels Sing” that proclaims “peace on earth and mercy mild, God and sinners reconciled.” Yes, even before his death and resurrection, Jesus' *birth* reconciles us to God.

But how? How is it that Jesus' birth reconciles us to God, and to each other? For a world in such need of reconciliation, for individual people in such need of reconciliation, what hope do we find in the birth of Jesus, a birth that took place so long ago and is itself shrouded in mystery?

Last month, while driving to Florida and back with my family, I listened to a recent biography of Billy the Kid by Michael Wallis. He begins his book this way:

That a young man known as Billy the Kid ever existed is an indisputable fact. His name is about all that anyone can ever agree upon when it comes to the telling of his story. It was not a name he sought for himself but one that was ascribed to him late in the final year of his brief twenty-one-year life by newspaper reporters and dime novelists. It also was the name that stuck. ... What is astonishing for any potential biographer is to realize that there is no agreement about Billy's parentage and ancestry, his place of birth, and even the date and place of his death. No one can say with certainty when he came into this world, for his actual birth date remains open to debate.¹

It occurred to me that similar words could be used to introduce a book on the birth of Jesus. That a man named Jesus was born just over two thousand years ago is also an indisputable fact. Beyond that, there is much to debate. We have known for some time that the traditional date and year of Jesus' birth were calculated incorrectly. His title, Christ, was not one that he sought for himself, but one that others ascribed to him. But it, along with others like Lord, was the name that stuck. The details of his ancestry and birth are vague and unclear. The fact that the two gospels with stories of his birth tell two *different* stories is itself

¹ Michael Wallis, *Billy the Kid: The Endless Ride* (W. W. Norton & Company, 2008).

telling. It is an event wrapped in mystery. Like stories of Billy the Kid, perhaps more than a little bit of it was embellished with myth and legend.

For some of us, to say that God came among us in the birth of a child two millennia ago provides little hope or consolation for the immediate challenges we face today. With the tools of historical criticism, we can study the context of Jesus' birth and understand the political and theological implications of his life in the Roman Empire. But what about today?

Friends, the significance of Jesus' birth is not limited to its historical circumstances. Neither is it bound to complicated and arcane theologies of the incarnation. Indeed, the significance—and reality—of God's presence in the world through Jesus Christ transcends these concerns and draws each one of us into the sacred drama of reconciliation.

At the end of the thirteenth century, a German theologian known as Meister Eckhart, a spiritual thinker who waded deep into the waters of mysticism, delivered a series of sermons in which he outlined his controversial idea that we can experience union with God through the birth of Christ in each of our souls. Not only did the Son of God enter human history through the incarnation of the eternal Christ, each of us becomes a child of God when Christ is born within our hearts.

Six hundred years later, this idea finds expression in the words of another familiar hymn, "O Little Town of Bethlehem": "O holy child of Bethlehem, descend to us, we pray; cast out our sin and enter in; be born in us today."

Be born in us today.

The idea rescues us from our historical questions and theological conundrums by bringing us into the presence of God, right here in our own world, in our own hearts, right now.

The essential meaning of Christianity—the essential meaning of Christmas—is not about the past. It is not about the future. It is about the present. Later this evening, when we sing “Joy to the World!” we won’t sing “the Lord *has* come”—we will sing “the Lord *is* come.” It has happened, to be sure, but it continues to happen, in each of us.

When we read these stories and sing these songs, our hearts and minds are drawn back into the past to relive an ancient scene that blends fact and parable into a tale that has shaped our culture and shapes our lives. But if we get stuck there in those hills overlooking the little town of Bethlehem, we miss the point; we trivialize a story with the power to change the world.

Yes, that is what’s at stake here: the transformation of the world. As it has always been, the world longs for the presence of God. The world longs for peace and goodness to reign. The world longs for reconciliation.

Into each of our hearts, if we allow it to happen, God will cause Christ to be born. In this birth, we are reborn. In this birth, the world is reborn.

When I held my newborn son in my arms, I understood as I never had before the truth of our belief that God enters the world in the birth of a child. There in my hands was a new creation, untainted by the brokenness of the world. There in my heart was an incredible sense of hope—hope about the person this baby would grow to be; hope about the contribution he would make to our world; hope about the love he would share with others; hope, that in my hands was the future.

As I relive Christmas through his eyes, I realize that this hope is for all of us. Christ is waiting to be born within each of us. Each time that happens, the world becomes more and more filled with the presence of God...until finally, we love each other as God loves us...until

finally, the world becomes the place Jesus told us about; the place Jesus lived for; yes, the place Jesus died for.

“O holy child of Bethlehem, descend to us, we pray; cast out our sin and enter in; be born in us today.”

Amen.