

Just Enjoy It!

Luke 2:1-20

Some times our faith can be stated simply, concisely, and clearly. For a very long time I have had this image that the entirety of our Christian faith is represented by thousands of books on an extremely long book shelf. The books are of many sizes – short, tall, thin, thick. They come from many authors. The books of the Bible are there, of course. But also there are books by the old masters as well as books written by theologians down through the ages to our present time.

Every credible book ever written about the Christian faith is there on my imaginary book shelf. When you enter this very large room to view the long array of books, you are immediately impressed that they are all neatly arranged, standing straight-up, one next to the other. There is no messiness here. When you walk to the far left of the books you discover a bookend. It is labeled *The Incarnation* and represents the virgin birth of God-self into the world as the baby Jesus. Walking all the way down to the other end of this long shelf of Christian books you find the other bookend. It is labeled *The Resurrection*, representing the bodily raising of Jesus the Christ from the dead.

These two bookends hold all these books representing Christianity neatly on the shelf. Just out of curiosity, you return to the first bookend, reach up and remove the bookend representing Jesus' birth. Suddenly, all the books tip over, many falling off the shelf altogether. You hurriedly pick them all up, put the bookend back in its place, thereby restoring order. But you can't help yourself. You walk all the way down to the opposite end of the book shelf, reach up, and remove the bookend representing Christ's resurrection. Again, all the books come tumbling down. And, again, you pick them all up, securely restoring order.

The theological moral of this imagery is this – without the Incarnation and the Resurrection there is no true Christianity. To embrace Jesus Christ, one must embrace how he entered our world and how he left it. The Incarnation and the Resurrection are the two most basic elements of what we believe.

Tonight we celebrate the first bookend, the first tenet of our faith, that defines Christ's divine beginnings – his birth in a lowly stable in a little non-descript town called Bethlehem, to a Jewish teenage virgin named Mary, overseen by her betrothed, a carpenter named Joseph. The angels sang and the shepherds adored the baby Jesus.

On this holy night, we are confronted by a deep theological reality. It is a time to ponder the depths of meaning for us in the baby Jesus, to probe all the ramifications of what this little child would become to the world. It is an evening to think deep theological thoughts, to grasp all the nuances of what this night in Bethlehem so long ago means for us today.

Or, is it? I'm not so sure. I believe all of you have had the experience of holding a new baby, if not your own, then someone else's. When you held that baby, what consumed your thoughts and emotions? Was it a deep philosophical examination of the genes flowing in the baby, or how she or he would come to change the world, or be changed by the world? Was holding the baby a thoroughly intellectual experience for you? I seriously doubt it. It isn't for me. When I hold a baby, or get a hug from a child, there is only one thing that consumes me – I just enjoy it! I don't think about it. I simply relish that moment of love and closeness.

I'm wondering if perhaps God doesn't want us to do the same thing on this most holy of nights. What do you think? Do you believe God wants us to wax theologically about the Virgin Birth, or do you think he might want us, for tonight, to just enjoy it? This year I vote for the latter. There is a time and place for everything. Every Sunday in worship we proclaim God's word, and strive to understand what the Bible has to say for us and our own lives now. In Sunday school classes, regardless of age, we do the same thing. We study to grasp as much as we can about God, and Christ, and the Holy Spirit, and how God works for us, with us, in us, and through us, and what our response to God ought to be.

Not tonight. This night is special. It is a night to relish, to savor. I want us to turn off our intellectual, probing, analytical minds for the rest of the evening. Look to the front of the sanctuary. Take it all in. The Christmas tree is not religious, but it is traditional. It is decorated with monograms of Christ and it beautifies our sanctuary. Look at the altar and the crèche upon it, representing the scene of that marvelous night two millennia ago. Look above the altar and take in the warm glow of the Advent candles and the Christ candle. Let your gaze now go the cross, the preeminent symbol of our faith, and let your eyes then look above it to our beautiful stained glass window. Now look at the people around you. This is family. These are friends. And if there are any strangers among us, they are not strangers to God, and thus we welcome them into our fold. This night is for warming the heart and touching the soul. The rest of the year we will deal with theology. This night is for wonder, and awe, and mystery, and joy, and to feel God's amazing power to touch our lives with his incarnational love.

Christ is born! Alleluia! Merry Christmas! Just enjoy it! Amen? Amen!

- Pastor Richmond B. Stoakes, Carbondale Community United Methodist Church, 24 December 2011
[Christmas Eve]