

Sunday December 4th, 2022

Advent II

Luke 2:1-7

“What Child is This”

The nativity play was going as planned and Joseph and Mary were going from house to house knocking on the doors and asking if there was any room for them. As they continued to get "no room" answers a little voice called from the back "YOU SHOULD HAVE BOOKED!" bringing the house down.

Ah! Christmas pageants. Parents and grandparents love them. Sunday School teachers not so much. Once a year out come the old bathrobes, foil covered paper crowns and a doll representing Jesus, unless there is a suitable baby available. I certainly remember the pageants we had when I was in Sunday School, but truth be told I never acted in one. My brother, Ian and I, always avoided appearing as shepherds or whatnot, by volunteering to pull open and closed the curtains.

For many children the best part of a pageant is the bag of treats we used to get, that always had a clementine orange in it. Well, we are not going to miss out on this special experience. Next Sunday morning, during our worship service, our children will offer to us a Christmas pageant. And perhaps you remember that as a staple of just about every children's Christmas pageant, the carol “What Child Is This” was sure to be sung.

Here are the lyrics:

What Child is this

Who laid to rest

On Mary's lap is sleeping?

Whom Angels greet with anthems sweet,

While shepherds watch are keeping?

So, bring Him incense, gold and myrrh,

Come Peasant, King to own Him

The King of Kings salvation brings,

Let loving hearts enthrone Him.

This, this is Christ the King,

Whom shepherds guard and Angels sing

Haste, haste, to bring Him laud,

The Babe, the Son of Mary.

The history of the author of these simple yet elegant words is in itself a lesson for the faithful. Too often we look at our current situation and think God can't use us where we are. After all, what impact could we make with our ordinary life? Paul was a missionary, Martin Luther was a monk, most hymns were written by ministers... does God only use those who live in the mission field? The history of today's hymn of choice is a cautionary tale about selling oneself short in serving God, with who or what we have.

William Chatterton Dix was born to John and Sussanah Dix in Bristol, England, June 14, 1837.

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William's childhood passed without any noteworthy events for William, which is perhaps exactly how a childhood should be. His father was a surgeon by profession, primarily it seems, for the money being a surgeon earned him and he was also a writer just for the pleasure of it. John Dix, William's father, wrote *The Life of Chatterton* the poet, a book of *Pen Pictures of Popular English Preachers* and other works.

His father gave him his middle name in honour of Thomas Chatterton, a poet about whom he had written a biography. William was educated at the Grammar School, Bristol, for a mercantile career, and became manager of a maritime insurance company in Glasgow where he spent most of his life. And while William followed in his father's footsteps on the latter, he went a different way for his profession.

As a manager of an insurance company William was quite happy to keep to an average life; quite happy for his greatest achievements to be closing on big insurance deals. But he was meant for more, and God was about to show William just that. At the age of 29, William was struck with a severe illness. This brought his life to a screeching halt, and he was forced to spend day after day in bed, as his body fought to survive. When the worst of it was over, William still had a considerable amount of recovery time to go through, and this is when depression struck.

Physical sickness revealed to William, the sickness of his own soul, and it sent him on a quest for true purpose. Thankfully, answers were sought in the right place, and William became an avid reader of the Bible. This produced a spiritual awakening, and when William was physically well, he began living his life for God. So, how did William live for God? Did he become a minister? A missionary? A monk? No, he returned to his life as an insurance manager, trusting God to use him exactly where he was.

While William continued to work in insurance, he used his love of writing, as a form of worship. William's favorite form of writing was poetry, and while most of his poems stayed hidden within a writing desk at home, there was one poem that William wanted to share beyond his desk drawer. The poem was called "What Child Is This?" Not being musically inclined, William searched for an established melody to pair with his poem.

There was one such melody that gave the poem of sense of grandeur and significance, a classic melody already beloved within the Christmas season: Greensleeves. Slowly, the combined poem and melody began to spread from church to church, as Christmas seasons came and went. Six years after its origin, "What Child Is This?" was published in a collection called "Christmas Carols Old and New." With time, the humble little poem, from a humble insurance salesman, became the most well-known use of Greensleeves' haunting sound.

The first lesson from this carol is straight forward enough. Wherever you are in life – whatever your profession may be – never believe the lies that God only uses those in the mission field. Just look at William Chatterton Dix, an insurance salesman whose poem of praise echoes on to this day. Now then, on to the carol itself, and its significant meaning.

William Chatterton Dix's carol, invokes the image of a typical nativity scene. Its why it is used in almost every Christmas pageant.

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Jesus is there on Mary's lap, and angels and shepherds tend to him. The second verse speaks of the presents brought by the magi, and in turn, that the whole point of the nativity is the gift of salvation that Jesus brought with his incarnation.

These simple words, penned by William Dix, invoking familiar images of the nativity, point to what is the core matter of the whole Christmas experience. The carol asks the question we have all asked as we gaze at any and all nativity scenes. "What child is this"? Why is this child born two thousand years ago, worth celebrating and writing carols about? As a touch stone, all of us know the joy the arrival of a new baby brings.

Whether our own children, grandchildren or babies in general; we love them. Just watch how on any given Sunday, how many adults in this fellowship gravitate to Flora, or any of the other young children in our midst. Babies are wonderful, but beyond our immediate circle of social contacts, the rest of the world doesn't know about, or really care about your precious new little one. People in China, for example, don't want to see your picture of your grandchildren.

So, what makes the birth of Jesus, not only special, but also universally important. What child is this that calls to shepherds, and wisemen, and to people for centuries? Why does this child mean anything to you personally? The writer of the Gospel of John has some insight into what makes the birth of Jesus the most significant birth of any baby before or since.

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it" (John 1:1-5). Or a little further on we read.

"The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God" (John 1:9-13).

The birth of Christ was not the ordinary birth of an ordinary man. It was the birth of the most unique Person in history. The birth of Jesus Christ was the incarnation of God Himself. In other words, the very God became a man. The significance of this is profound and will take all eternity for us to appreciate. The conception and birth of Jesus Christ was the mingling of God with humanity. Such a thing had never occurred before. The incarnation of Jesus; God in flesh, sets our faith apart from every other religion, or philosophy.

Long ago, there ruled in Persia a wise and good king. He loved his people. He wanted to know how they lived. He wanted to know about their hardships. Often, he dressed in the clothes of a working man or a beggar, and went to the homes of the poor. No one whom he visited thought that he was their ruler. One time he visited a very poor man who lived in a cellar. He ate the coarse food the poor man ate. He spoke cheerful, kind words to him.

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Then he left. Later he visited the poor man again and disclosed his identity by saying, "I am your king!" The king thought the man would surely ask for some gift or favor, but he didn't. Instead, he said, "You left your palace and your glory to visit me in this dark, dreary place. You ate the course food I ate. You brought gladness to my heart! To others you have given your rich gifts. To me you have given yourself!"

This is the point. A baby enters our lives and from then on, we give of ourselves to that new life. Our time, talent, and treasure: go to caring for this new life. And this is the case for many years. It is a demanding task to raise children, and is giving pause to some people. I saw recently in a news report, that in South Korea, they have a serious problem, because the birth rate has fallen so low.

There are not enough new children being born to fill jobs, and support their pension plan. In Canada we have a similar problem. In Korea, it is mainly because young women do not want to have children; because it interferes with their careers. The patriarchal society of Korea also downgrades the value of women who take maternity leave.

For many of these women, the birth of a baby is not worth the effort. William Dix in his simple words, recognized the way a baby can truly change our lives. Babies depend on us for everything. We need to feed, clothe, change and of late, we scour the planet looking for children's Tylenol. We anxiously listen, and watch for anything that seems to be out of the ordinary, or indicates distress.

The vulnerability of being a baby is absolute. So why did God send his Son as a baby? Part of the answer may be to remind us that babies change things. In terms of Jesus, this baby changes everything.

In 1868, Bret Harte who wrote stories and poetry about the California gold rush, wrote a short story called "The Luck of Roaring Camp." It was this story that turned Mr. Harte into an internationally known writer. The story was written about a mining town in California called Roaring Camp. The only woman in the town was a Cherokee woman named Sal. She became pregnant, but died while giving birth to a son. This left a baby in a town full of single men. Not just men, but rough, tough, rude, crude men of the wild west.

What are they going to do with a baby? The child was thought to be a sign of good fortune so they gave him the name Thomas Luck. They originally put him in a dirty box, wrapped in dirty clothes. But that didn't look right, so they ordered a rosewood cradle with satin sheets and a soft pillow. The best room they had was filthy, so these men got on their hands and knees and cleaned the floors and the walls. Then they decided that if they were going to take care of a baby, they needed to start using soap. They needed to wash their hands and bath more often.

And then they said, "Maybe we don't need to be gambling so much. Maybe we don't need to be fighting so much. Maybe we don't need to be drinking so much." And as the story progresses, the entire town of Roaring Camp was transformed by the arrival of a single baby boy. William Dix, in his simple carol, recognized that as charming and simple the image of the nativity is, and continues to be, the power and meaning of the nativity is all about the one who came.

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God knew what humanity needed and out of love for us he sent the only one who could meet that need. Consider what God was seeking to do by sending Jesus.

If our greatest need had been information, God would have sent us an educator.

If our greatest need had been technology, God would have sent us a scientist.

If our greatest need had been money, God would have sent us an economist.

If our greatest need had been pleasure, God would have sent us an entertainer.

But our greatest need was forgiveness, so God sent us a Savior.

What child is this? I think if you search your heart for the answer to that critical question, God will reveal his universal gift to you.