



“Holy Child”

First Sunday of Christmas
Saturday and Sunday, December 30-31, 2017

All Services
The Reverend Dr. Jack M. Horner, Jr.
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church
Camp Hill, Pennsylvania

Isaiah 61:10-62:3; Psalm 148;
Galatians 4:4-7; Luke 2:22-40

Grace and peace be to you from our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.
Amen.

I love this time of the year. It's just something about the decorations, the lights, the Christmas trees, singing of familiar carols. My wife used to say it's about making memories for the children, talking about our role as parents and Christmas time seems to be family time. We have all these traditions and rituals, as we gather together with families and children open presents. One of the one that I learned from my wife was the hiding of the pickle. The green ornament we try to place in the tree where it's a little bit harder to find it. The child that finds the pickle the first gets an extra present.

Of course, it's also the gifts that are given and the gifts that are received. I just want to let you know that the pans that I bought my wife for Christmas this year went over very well. I know that many of you were concerned about that. The sweater that I am wearing today, my son just loved it. Oh, its okay, I bought him one too.

And of course, Christmas Eve worship has always been so important to me. For it's on Christmas Eve before my congregation's 11:00 p.m. service in 1981, that I said “yes” to God and received the call to ministry. So, Christmas Eve has always very special in my life.

I love the various traditions whatever they might be. Traditions are important I think in helping us become who we are as people. When Linda and I were married we had our first New Year's together and I told her that she needed to make Pork and Sauerkraut, and she just looked at me funny. It was then that I learned that Pork and Sauerkraut was more of a Pennsylvania German tradition with the emphasis on *Pennsylvania*, then it was a German tradition that she came from. The first time she made it she used Pork Chops. I finally set her straight.

Tradition and rituals connect us to something that is greater than us. It helps connect us to family, and to community, and even to our own faith tradition. It helps foster in us a passion and our very identity as to who we are. And this Sunday after Christmas is no different. In the lessons we see the Holy family, Mary, Joseph, and baby Jesus involved

in important religious rituals, traditions helping them to understand who they are as God's people. Eight days after Jesus was born his parents took him to the local synagogue up to visit the rabbi to be circumcised. This physical action was a symbolic of their separation from the world; the difference between what it meant to be a Jew and a Gentile, and it showed their unique relationship that they had with their God.

A month after the birth the first-born son was presented to God in the ceremony that represented a buying back, a "redeeming" of the child to God given as an offering from his parents. The parents acknowledged that the child belonged to God, who along was the one gave life.

Forty days after the birth would be the purification of Mary. Mary had been considered ritual impure after the birth. Mary and Joseph were to bring an offering, a dove or a pigeon, one for Mary, one for Jesus, not that Jesus needed to be purified of anything as the unique son of God.

Observance of all of these religious traditions and rituals shows the devotion of Mary and Joseph had to their Jewish faith. We can see that Jesus' identity came not only from God but also it was fostered by his parents who brought him to synagogue and temple to rabbi and to priest. He was not created in a vacuum, but instead God and the people that God put into his life helped him to understand who he was a holy child.

And in our gospel, we can hear of two others who also participate in helping him to understand his identity. Simeon and Anna, two saints and prophets who spent their whole life worshipping in the temple, waiting for God's holy messiah to be revealed to the world, patiently waiting in a world where suffering was a way of life. Simeon held him to his arms, the holy child, and it was for him God's hope and salvation that he waited for his whole life.

I've known through my years in ministry so many members who waited patiently for God's salvation. They were spiritually in tune with God; righteous, devout, and prayerful like Simeon and Anna.

You and I need people like that in our life. People like Harry von Holten, who was born in a German neighborhood in Queens. As a child he lived over his parent's German deli and then later became involved with the food industry finally retiring as a supermarket manager. By the time I met him he was the chair of the call committee and had served in a number of capacities, usually around the issues of finance, such as treasure or financial chair. Over the years he had seen it all. He had seen the change in Queens neighborhood, he'd seen changes in his church. He always challenged me to never lose hope, to always keep focused. He would say to me (in that NY Queens accent) "Pastor, just keep doin' what your doin'." He believed in God's Spirit to transform and empower the people of God. And he was thrilled by the people that our congregation began to attract, as we made proactive steps in ministry, starting a preschool and summer day camp, Spanish language outreach. Harry was a true believer. He understood that God was active in the life of his own congregation in this neighborhood through our ministries. He was pragmatic and yet hopeful, he was grounded and yet spirit-led.

And then there was Marge Jacobs in my second congregation. She was a retired nurse from Mount Kisco. She had been a member for a long time, but I didn't see her the first year that I was the pastor there, and then she showed up the following Lent at a noon mid-week service. As I delivered the sermon, tears began to fall from her eyes. She was almost inconsolable. You see, she had suffered early deaths of two children. One from AIDS and one being murdered in New York City. It left her tremendously bitter toward God, and yet she continued to wait patiently for the Lord. She had a real, powerful faith. Like Jacob, she had wrestled with the Lord seeking to understand the meaning behind the tragedies that she had suffered through. She lived the words of St. Paul that the "Spirit of God intercedes in our weakness." And yet as she reconnected with her congregation, she became the prayer giant for and with us. I've shared with some of you that Marge was the one who'd come to our worship space early and then go chair after chair touching every seat that people were to sit in and to ask God to send his Spirit to touch the hearts of the people who were there to worship and hear the message that was offered. I was honored to be their pastor and finally commit them to God at their funerals. These were lives that were well lived.

People, like Simeon and Anna, Harry and Marge, people who experienced the holy child in their lives, die with a peace and confidence of God's salvation.

The Philosopher Søren Kierkegaard said, "Purity of heart is to will one thing," and later in his gospel Luke says there is "need of only one thing," and that is to be near Jesus, and to see his salvation dawn."

One thing, one thing, the holy child given to the world, to heal broken hearts, to give hope to those who wait patiently, to bring peace to our lives and to our world.

As we stand on the edge of the beginning of a new year I would like to offer you a new year's blessing.

May you invite people into your lives who believe in the power and promises of God and inspire you to faithfulness and service.

May you embrace the holy child in your life and celebrate this greatest of God's gift.

And may you foster passion in the life of another through the love of Jesus.

Amen.

In the name of the Father, and of the + Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen

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