

Sermon preached by
The Reverend Hope H. Eakins
at St. John's Episcopal Church, West Hartford, Connecticut
on December 25, 2017, Christmas Day, Year A

I heard the true meaning of Christmas proclaimed in an unusual way recently. While sorting books for the parish Christmas festival this month, I discovered an old copy of *Children's Letters to God*, a popular press report on a piece of research about the religious concepts of children. It is filled with charming notes like "Dear God, Are boys better than girls? I know you are one, but try to be fair. Signed, Sylvia." And "Dear God, When is the best time I can talk with you? I know you are always listening, but when will you be listening especially hard in Ann Arbor, Michigan? Sincerely yours, Allen." The letters are all written by children but they could just as easily be have been written by the child within each of us.

Interestingly, the original research design for the study required the interviewers to stay in the role of observer. But the method didn't work. When the researchers acted only as questioners and observers, the children didn't feel safe enough to respond with the imaginations of their hearts. And so the team gave up its orthodox methodology for a reason that sounds to me an awful lot like the true meaning of Christmas. They said that they could not ignore "the importance of inserting oneself into the child's world of play in order to come close to the child."

Now isn't that what Christmas is all about? God inserted in to our world in order to come close to us? God bending down to play with the children of this world? God not remaining aloof but coming to seek us out? Oh, God tried a few other ways first. God tried Paradise, a Garden of Eden where all our needs were met, but the children of God got into trouble there because they wanted to know a little too much for their own good. And so God got a little more specific and made a covenant with them. "I will be your God and you will be my people," God said. But God's children didn't believe it or wouldn't believe it because the news seemed too good to be true, so God had some commandments carved in stone, carved so deeply that they could never be forgotten, simple commands in simple language: No kill. No lie. No steal. But even those straightforward commandments were too hard for God's children to obey, so God sent prophets to write the covenant on our hearts. "Love me and love your neighbor," said God, "if you do just these two things, you don't even have to remember the commandments.

And since all children forget things sometimes, God gave us signs too, signs like burning bushes and splitting seas, and the love story of God and God's creation kept on being repeated in a cycle of human sinfulness and divine forgiveness until the fullness of time, when God reached out to us and sent us a Babe in a manger.

A babe was born, the best evidence that a love affair has taken place. It is as though God said, "Okay, you'll never be able to come to where I am, however much I would like that, so I will come to where you are because I love you just the way you are and I will love you to death." God really is a shameless lover, you know. In a way, on that starry night in Bethlehem, God was asking, "Will

you still respect me in the morning?” For how can we respect a God who is reduced to a helpless babe in a manger, a babe with cow manure on his foot and milk dribbling from his mouth? God incarnate? I AM WHO AM in a stable? The God we are to worship poured out for us in a squalling bundle that we can hold in one hand?

This is the mystery we are here to worship today, Truth wrapped in swaddling clothes, a God so in love with us that God’s suffering and need and cold and rejection don’t matter if they open our hearts. Ours is a God who talks baby talk to us because we are God’s children. And even when the baby Jesus grew up, he still spoke to us as to children – in parables and simple stories, in miracles and in bread and fish and wine. And he taught us to pray as children pray in the simple words, “Our Father...” We lose sight of this God when we get tangled up in complicated explanations and prayers that are too formal. We miss this God when we think we are all grown up.

Christ our Lord did not come as a king at home only in royal courts, nor did he come as a theologian to be known only by scholars. He did not come as a Jew to be recognized only by Israel. He came as a poor baby who is reachable by everyone, a baby who comes to play with us and teach us that earth and hay and blood and human life are holy. Our God became incarnate in the Baby Jesus to show us just how far he would go to be held in our arms, and that is our awesome responsibility.

When I was a new priest, I was called to visit a baby who had been born prematurely. No matter how many times I set foot in a newborn intensive care nursery, my breath catches and my heart speeds up when I see how tiny the babies are and how fragile is their hold on life. This little girl was out of crisis and was gaining weight so she was getting ready to leave the ICU, and when I arrived she was not in her Isolette but in the arms of a nurse. “I am here to bless her,” I told the nurse and in a flash, the nurse put the tiny bundle into my arms. And although I had never seen this child before, I would have done anything for her because she had been entrusted into my care and because I held her life in my hands. And as I made the sign of the cross on her forehead, I could barely speak my prayer that she would know that the arms of the God who had loved her into being would love her always and never ever falter.

God does this to us, thrusts the baby Jesus into our arms, into our world, into our hearts and trusts us to care for him. And so let us start doing it. Let us care for the Babe who is incarnate in Uncle George who irritates us every Christmas. Let us see the Babe in the homeless man who holds out his hand for money and really yearns for a smile and a greeting more than a bill. Let us care for the Babe in the inner city kids whose school doesn’t have enough books and in the Rohingya kids who don’t even have a school. Let us give because it is in giving that we know that we have enough. Let us love because it is in loving that we discover God.

Merry Christmas, little children of God.