

## **“Hold the Baby”**

Liturgical Date: Christmas Day (readings for Christmas Dawn except OT)

Primary Texts: St Luke 2:1-20; Isaiah 7:10-14

Portions adapted from a sermon by Rev. Karl Schuessler (CPR Book)

Merry Christmas! I bring to you greetings of peace from God our Father and from His Son, Jesus, whose birth we celebrate today. The primary texts for today, this Feast of the Nativity of Our Lord Jesus-Christmas Day, are the Old Testament Lesson from Isaiah 7 and Gospel Lesson from St. Luke 2. The title of the sermon is “Hold the Baby.”

Most of us find it very easy to warm up to Christmas. The season is so soft and warm and fuzzy. It’s friendly and cordial, full of good will. And even this year in the midst of a pandemic, I have noticed something that I notice every year around Christmas time. People are more friendly, have more smiles on their faces, and seem to be more willing to help their fellow man. In many ways, it does appear to be as Andy Williams crooned, “The Most Wonderful Time of the Year.” Why? I think it is because at the center of the Christmas holiday is a baby. Even in our more secular age where there has been a move toward a more generic “holiday season”, with a little nudging many people will talk about “Baby Jesus.” He seems so sweet, so non-threatening-and that back-story!. Of course, Jesus didn’t stay a baby and His mission would encompass much more than the beloved Christmas account we hear in the Gospel of St. Luke. But for this morning, I want to stay on that baby theme. Because, who can resist a baby? Just about everyone loves babies and Christmas is about the birth of a baby.

A newborn baby can bring great joy and excitement. Babies can bring out the best in us. Automatically we may respond to them. We want to reach out and embrace them. Even the shepherds in our Gospel text couldn't resist a baby. These were hard-working blue collar guys with tough hands who worked out in the elements. But after the angelic announcement they too wanted to get near this baby.

*"Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord"* (Luke 2:10-11). The arrival, the appearance of this Word of life, can't be stated more clearly. We've listened to the baby. Who hasn't heard a baby coo and cry? We've seen the baby with our eyes of faith. We've looked at Him and touched Him. As we heard last night in the final Lesson, God speaking through St. John tells us that this is the Word made flesh. Christmas means that Christ, the very Son of God, comes to us as an infant. This is our theme: hold the baby, for our God comes to us as a human. This point is stressed in a statement attributed to Martin Luther: *"We cannot draw Christ too deeply into the flesh."*

### The Christ-Baby Accepts Us

You know you don't have to work to win acceptance from babies. Automatically, they accept you. Their approval doesn't depend on your good looks, your education, your proper manners, your politically correct words, or your speaking with the right accent. Babies couldn't care less about the car you drive, the perfume you wear, or the style of clothes you put on. Babies accept you as you are.

Now I ask you: if babies accept you without discriminating based on the factors I just mentioned, how much more will the baby Jesus? How much more will your loving, heavenly Father, your Creator and the Creator of all babies? You don't have to earn a baby's approval any more than you have to earn God's approval. God gives love freely, simply because God wants to give love and because God wants to love you.

Lurid misdeeds in your life don't matter to a baby. Past hurts may persist in torturing you, but they don't matter to a baby. The loads of guilt and shame we may carry, they just don't matter to a baby. If you're staggering today under the weight of a bundle of sins, feel free to throw it away. Not that you need my permission, but please get rid of it. If you are in Christ and still carrying a load of guilt, toss it quicker than you put the used wrapping paper in the trash or recycling bin. In its place, pick up the Christ-baby. Hold Him in your arms. He loves you. In His forgiveness He accepts you. That's our Lord; that's your baby Jesus.

The Christ-Baby Makes an Impact  
on Us by His Sheer Presence

In our Old Testament Lesson from Isaiah 7 we hear one of the titles of Jesus. I attended a small Christian college about 30-40 minutes from here with this name-and it is a great one because this name reminds us of one of the great attributes of God. This name is "Emmanuel", and it means the same thing whether it is spelled beginning with an "E" or "I". God with us. The God of the Christian faith, the only true God, is not distant and detached. He is with us. Very close indeed, as Christmas reminds us. His abiding presence is all. Just being here presents an all-powerful witness. When you think of it, the presence of babies is about all they have to offer. Babies don't work; they don't produce a thing (except dirty diapers); they never bring home a salary; they never make a profit; they never make the bed. Since they're here, all we can do is to look at them. You've caught yourself doing it again and again. Don't be ashamed to admit it-I know I have. You stand there by the crib and just stare at this wondrous miracle. Perhaps you even reach down your hand and gently touch their back while the little one sleeps-just to be sure the breath is going in and out of their lungs. You feel enthralled, captivated just because they're here. We may find it difficult to comprehend, but it's true: being is as important as doing.

One of the things pastors do-especially when a pandemic is not going on-is visit people in the hospital or what we call shut-ins either in their homes or assisted living facilities. When I make these calls, prayer is always an important element of the visit. If they are hospitalized or facing an illness I pray that the medicine will work effectively. I pray that the doctors, nurses, and other caregivers will make the right medical decisions and use the skills that they have. I also pray for the person being visited, of course. I pray that they will be conscious of the presence of the Lord Christ because, underneath, His everlasting arms are supporting them. Hovering over them, protecting them. Jesus is here; He's ever-present, and just His being here carries such power for reassurance and healing.

If a cross hangs on the wall, it reminds them that their Suffering Savior is present. He has suffered for them. They are not alone. If they receive Holy Communion, they "see with their eyes" and touch and taste our Lord, who is present right there in the Sacrament. Take and hold the body of Christ. Take, eat. Take, drink. These same words we will hear later this morning as we Commune with our brothers and sisters and God Himself. The baby is here. Contemplate and celebrate His presence.

## The Christ-Baby Brings Comfort and Strength

I want to share something else with you. It is somewhat personal, but I think that many of you can relate and may have done the same thing. I can't explain it to you scientifically, but I can tell you it does bring comfort. And if you are with me on this, you will know what I am talking about. When I've faced trouble in my life, grieved over some loss, struggled to resolve a conflict, despaired over a failure, or just was plain having a bad day-or a string of them-I was tempted to give up. And do you know what I have done in those times? Grabbed the youngest child in our house at that time and just hugged them, held them close. Suddenly things got better. I could make it. And you have to do that when they are little, because once they get older they often don't want mom or dad to just grab them and hug them!

A little child cannot solve our problems or take our troubles away in a literal sense. They can not wave a magic wand that can solve whatever is troubling you: a bill that you did not know how you were going to pay, a scary medical diagnosis you had just received, or resolve a conflict with a loved one. Strength-wise a little child is actually helpless to "fix" those things. But in this embrace I, and I imagine many of you, received comfort and strength.

When our Lord came into the flesh, He gave up all His power and took on our helplessness. He became as helpless as a tiny baby. From the depths, from desperation and despair, look to the Christ-baby and cradle Him in your arms. Hold Him close. He will comfort you and strengthen you. He will help you cope with all of life's ups and downs and pains and uncertainties. And since He is God, He actually does have the power to deliver you. And another great thing is that Jesus never gets "too old" to not desire our embrace!

If you still need any more proof that babies can bring comfort and strength, just visit a nursing home (when we can again) and see what happens when someone brings a baby in there. There will be smiles and eyes lighting up all over the place. In the Scripture remember the aging Simeon who went into the temple in Jerusalem. He took the Christ-baby in his arms and said, *"Lord, now lettest Thou Thy servant depart in peace according to Thy word, for mine eyes have seen Thy salvation"* (Lk 2:29-30). Hold the Christ-baby and see your salvation.

It makes no difference if your hands are rough and calloused like those hands of the carpenter Joseph must have been. Or if your hands are soft because you spend your days typing away on a computer. Gently pick up your baby and hold Him close. Listen to the Christ-baby. Look at Him, and with your hands reach out and touch Him. This little one, this Word of Life, accepts you as His own out of His grace and mercy, promises to be with you always, and brings you comfort and strength.

Amen.