

***God in the Child: Heirs of the Kin-dom***  
***Galatians 4:4-6; Luke 1:26-38***  
***December 21, 2008***

Every church has its own stories of the Christmas pageant. We even have ours, which is far more than a pageant. Did you know that Cassey the camel gained 700 pounds and several feet of height since she was here two years ago!

At one church Mrs. Smith was overseeing her first Christmas pageant – and perhaps her last! In hindsight she saw a few things she might have done differently. Perhaps it wasn't such a good idea to have all the second- and third-graders be animals, especially after Billy McCleester asked if they could make animal noises and Mrs. Smith said, "Yes, Billy, that might be very realistic." Or maybe somebody could have pointed out to her that it takes a bit of time to dress, move and fix the hair of the heavenly host, especially when it is made up of 32 angels all between two and four years old. And when working with the fifth-grade narrators, Tasha and Jerod, who were actually very fine readers, who would have thought that Mrs. Smith should have gone over punctuation with them?

Let's just say it was a rough afternoon in Bethlehem. Mary had been sick all morning and the bucket next to the manger was for her to use. Joseph may have been a "righteous man and unwilling to expose Mary to public disgrace," but he was also thirteen years old and decided about ten days ago that he wasn't going to enjoy this pageant at all. So Mrs. Smith knew it was going to be a struggle, but when the animals arrived behind those shepherds, any hope of heavenly peace vanished. They took over the whole chancel and elevated "lowing" to a new cacophonous, hip-hop, rap sounding art form. The angels, rather the angel mom and dad working back stage completely missed their cue so the host arrived long after the wise men, even after the congregation had sung, "Angels We Have Heard on High," even after Tasha said four times: "And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of heavenly host." But when they arrived, they looked heavenly and their halos were perfect.

Right near the end, just before everyone was to sing "Joy to the World the Lord is come," the narrator Jerod fought his way to center stage for his last line. He stepped on and over an abundance of sheep and cows, even some dogs and cats and one child who came as a mouse. Angel parents in the congregation were paying no attention to the narrator, making up for lost googling time, and completely ignoring that request about flash photography. Mary was reaching for the bucket, and Joseph had rolled his eyes so many times they just about fell out of his head. Shouting out over the barnyard noise, he never did get the parents' attention. Finally he put his folder down and stretched out his arms and with no little amount of exasperation yelled, "Christ was born for this?" Mrs. Smith, now

fully exhausted, said to no one in particular, “It was an exclamation point, not a question mark.”<sup>i</sup>

It sounds familiar, doesn't it? Life never seems to go as we imagine it. The unexpected always seems to arise at the most inconvenient time. Surprises interrupt our well-laid plans. Detours knock us off course and it takes forever to recover stability. Moodiness sours a supposedly joyous occasion. Misunderstandings fester and balloon into near warfare. And with Jerod we question, “Christ was born for this?” Why in the world would God want to come into such an absolute chaotic mess?

That's exactly the point. Because life is messy, God comes to us. Because life is chaotic, God wants to be with us. Because life is difficult, God draws near to us.

God comes as a child because children are vulnerable. They need the guidance, nurturing and love of others in order to survive and to thrive. The truth is that although we mature and grow strong in spirit as we age, we are always vulnerable. We are always prone to be hurt when we lose someone we love. We can feel unwanted when we are discounted. Although as adults we are supposed to be strong and able to conquer the world, sometimes we honestly feel that the world is out to get us. In the midst of our weakness, God comes to be a source of strength. Although our families of origin often offer significant comfort and safety, we still need a larger net of security and affirmation. God offers the assurance that we are adopted into the family of God, that we are heirs grafted onto the great family tree of faith. We need not walk through life alone, for we are part of the great group of kinfolk who have staked their claim with God. We have inherited the promise that we belong to God.

Oftentimes we feel that we have to earn the privilege of belonging to the family of God by pleasing God. We seek to earn our place through works righteousness, following all the rules. At times we know that we've broken so many rules that pleasing God feels hopeless, so we simply give up. That's often the point when God can finally catch us, because we are vulnerable. We let our guard down and open ourselves to grace.

Sometimes in admitting we don't have all the answers, we suddenly hear a whisper leading us on. Sometimes in admitting that we don't get it, a door opens revealing a new way. Oftentimes when we stop talking and stop giving ourselves the answers to our own questions, we create the space in which we can listen for God to shine light in our darkness.

Membership in the family of God is not something we can earn; it is not even something we can buy. The gift of being adopted into the family of God is pure gift, it is amazing grace. We are freed from slavery to the law and freed for a loving relationship with God. We don't need to earn our way into the kin-dom by

pleasing God. God draws near to us in Jesus to assure us that we indeed belong to God. With that assurance we then want to live our lives in ways that are pleasing to God.

Dr. Fred Craddock tells about meeting a man in a restaurant in the South. When the man heard that Dr. Craddock was a pastor, he told the minister about his unfortunate childhood.

The man had been an illegitimate child who felt shunned by his peers and looked down on by many people in the small town where he lived. He was a rejected and lonely boy.

One day he heard of a new minister in town and decided to go to that church. As he listened, he was captivated by what he heard. The preacher's message was so moving that the boy sat in contemplation for while, even after the blessing.

When he started to leave, his shyness compelled him to attempt to by-pass the minister without shaking hands. But suddenly as he came near the tall man, he felt a strong hand on shoulder. Obligated to look up, he saw the preacher's smiling face. Then he heard pastor say: "What's your name, boy? Whose son are you?"

Before the lad could answer, the pastor continued, "I know who you are. I know who your family is. There's a distinct family resemblance. Why, you are the son of God!" Then the loving preacher put his long arm around boy, and pointed him to the door saying, "Now, go claim your inheritance!"

When the man finished telling the story, he said to Dr. Craddock, "I left church that day a different person. In fact, that was really the beginning of my life." Then the man got up and left.

Dr. Craddock was so fascinated by the story that he asked the waitress who the man was. She replied, "Ben Hooper, the two-term governor of Tennessee."

God draws near to us in Jesus to assure us of our family resemblance, to remind us to claim our inheritance as children of God, to draw us in to the family of God. May you receive the gift of Jesus Christ anew and claim your membership in the kin-dom of God.

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<sup>i</sup> David A. Davis, *Lectionary Homiletics*, December 2005.