

Sermon for Evening Prayer Christmas Eve

Lessons:

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the tenth Verse of the second Chapter of the Book of the Prophet Zechariah [**ZECK-are-eye-uh**].

“... Sing and rejoice, O daughter of Zion: for, lo, I come, and I will dwell in the midst of thee, saith the LORD. And many nations shall be joined to the LORD in that day, and shall be my people: and I will dwell in the midst of thee, and thou shalt know that the LORD of hosts hath sent me unto thee. And the LORD shall inherit Judah his portion in the holy land, and shall choose Jerusalem again. Be silent, O all flesh, before the Lord: for he is raised up out of his holy habitation.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the eighteenth Verse of the first Chapter of the Gospel According to St. Matthew.

“Now the birth of Jesus Christ was on this wise: When as his mother Mary was espoused to Joseph, before they came together, she was found with child of the Holy Ghost. Then Joseph her husband, being a just man, and not willing to make her a publick example, was minded to put her away privily. But while he thought on these things, behold, the angel of the Lord appeared unto him in a dream, saying, Joseph, thou son of David, fear not to take unto thee Mary thy wife: for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Ghost. And she shall bring forth a son, and thou shalt call his name JESUS: for he shall save his people from their sins. Now all this was done, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken of the Lord by the prophet, saying, Behold, a virgin shall be with child, and shall bring forth a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel, which being interpreted is, God with us. Then Joseph being raised from sleep did as the angel of the Lord had bidden him, and took unto him his wife: And knew her not till she had brought forth her firstborn son: and he called his name JESUS.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the First Lesson: “I will dwell in the midst of thee, saith the LORD. And many nations shall be joined to the LORD in that day, and shall be my people....”

In the Name of the Father, and of the ☩ Son, and of the Holy Ghost. *Amen.*

Introduction and Theme:

We know something the ancient Jews did not. They thought that when Zechariah [**ZECK-are-eye-uh**] quoted God as saying, “I come, and I will dwell in the midst of thee”ⁱ the Lord would come as He had in King David’s time, to dwell in the Tabernacle on Mount Zion in the city of Jerusalem. That is, they expected God to recreate the glories of the former unified, independent Kingdom that had been, through their own sin and faithlessness, first divided into the squabbling mini-states of Israel and Judah and then separately destroyed by the Babylonians and Assyrians.

Development:

- 1. We know, as the ancient Jews did not, that God did not intent to reestablish the former, and failed, national political entity over which David, and Solomon, and their successors had ruled.**

We know, as they did not, that God had in mind something quite different for the way He would come and what He would do when He did. When God came, He came and dwelt among them, not as an intangible presence on the holy Mount, but as a man among other men. A man so ordinary in so many ways that He was easily overlooked by most. Only those who came into His near presence, within sight of Him and sound of His voice, sensed that someone of extraordinary power had come among them.

Or, sometimes, they were the ones who had spoken to others who had come that physically near to Him and had paid attention to what those others recounted of their experiences with him. People such as the centurion in Capernaum [**KAH-per-nah-um**] who knew that *this* man, whoever He was, could heal his beloved servant.ⁱⁱ Or the desperate mother from a foreign race in southern Lebanon who knew this man was the only one Who could heal her ailing daughter.

2. What Zechariah was really saying was that God would come and dwell among us in two different, but connected senses or ways.

First, there was the event we celebrate here tonight. God came as a little human baby so that He could go through, and demonstrate to us that He had gone through, all the normal progression of human life: birth, growth, adulthood, and death. No ancient Jew, indeed, no pagan from the cultures surrounding the Jews, could ever have conceived of such a thing.

The God of the Jews, after all, was so incredibly powerful that the mere sight of part of His shining Glory could blind a person. Even when God's chosen prophet, Moses, was given the special blessing of being permitted to see God in person, he could only do so from the back, as God was going away from him, or else he would have died of the experience.

Yet this incredibly powerful God, whose mere presence could bring death, of His own will came down not only to live among us but to do so in the first instance as a powerless, helpless baby. A baby like all other babies, who required constant care because He would die if He had been left unattended.

That was the situation from the time of the Incarnation, the "enfleshing" of God or God's taking on a human body, which we celebrate today, and Our Lord's Ascension. After that came the second sense in which Zechariah was telling us that God would come and dwell among us. From the time of the Ascension until now, and continuing on into the future until Our Lord comes once again in His body, *we* are the Body of Christ, dwelling in the midst of the world, bringing His presence to all mankind.

Conclusion:

This, too, is part of what we celebrate here tonight: God came as a helpless baby that we – weak and helpless though we ourselves are – could become the Light of the World and the Hope of all mankind.

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The Rev'd Canon John A. Hollister
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1 Psalms and Lessons for the Church Year (1943), THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER x (PECUSA 1928).

2 Zechariah 2:10-13 (KJV).

3 St. Matthew 1:18-25 (KJV).

4 Zechariah 2:10 (KJV).

5 Ibid.

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