

WITNESS

THE CHRISTMAS STORY

DECEMBER 21, 2008 – ADVENT IV

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The annual Christmas story presented by our Sunday School may be the most theologically profound thing we do in this sanctuary. Here, as in other churches, the Story has achieved sacramental status: prescribed roles, vestments, and familiar liturgy.

The wonderful thing about sacraments is their simple, unequivocal message. Baptism: we each belong to God, as we celebrated for Payton today; Communion: God gives himself away for us;

and our annual Pageant: God took on our flawed and glorious flesh.

We've been talking this Advent about wakefulness, willingness, and wonder: three indispensable perspectives if we are to witness and become witnesses to the birth of the Christ child.

Without wakefulness, willingness and wonder the claim that God took on this frail human body will seem like quite a stretch. But if we embrace the incarnation – questions, doubts, wonderments and all – we may just rediscover how strange and sublime Christmas really is.

Don't you love the way our faith keeps expecting us to accept truths that force us into new ways of thinking and behaving?

It would be easy to get lulled with a cup of hot coco and putting our feet up and to forget that Christmas turns the world upside down, just like Easter is a spiritual defibrillator that brings those depressed disciples back to life.

What I'm saying today is unless we make a special effort we might be content to let Christmas remain that sentimental and hectic time of year when we decorate, shop and gather with family and friends before the ball drops in Times Square.

But there's another option. One thing I'm slowly learning preparing for triathlons: training that shocks your body gets you to the next level. Our swimming instructor says, 'people come here and swim lap after lap, then wonder why they don't improve.'

'The answer is, she says, they're in a rut. There is less value to each workout. But if you intersperse your familiar routine with a regimen your lungs and limbs don't expect you'll experience dramatic improvement.'

The story of Christmas is a workout we aren't expecting – and I don't just mean putting lights in all the windows, wrapping dozens of gifts, and keeping the walks shoveled.

To witness the Creator of the universe entering the humble and helpless life of a first century peasant baby is to have our world turned upside down and question everything – where God resides, who God is, what God is up to, not to mention what life is about anyway.

Our old answers – God is in heaven, God is impersonal, God is an angry judge, and life is a struggle for survival are monotonous religious laps we repeat over and over with little benefit.

But to challenge those answers with the mystery of the incarnation – a doctrine someone said is almost unintelligible to the modern mind but central to Christian faith – to challenge our going through the motions with the idea that God comes to us as a vulnerable, dependent infant will get us to the next level of discipleship.

So I encourage us to add to our Advent and Christmas preparations of hanging the greens, filling the stockings and anticipating Christmas dinner with family and friends some quiet moment when we might ponder, like Mary, how the Word became flesh and dwelt among us full of grace and truth. And then wait for the real magic of Christmas – the light and peace of the Christ child – to descend upon us. It changes the way we see each other, the world and what we are called to do.

But if the incarnation seems too complicated or confusing or difficult an intellectual mountain to climb, why not let your heart take over and consider the children and how easy they make it look? Amen.