



SAINT THOMAS CHURCH FIFTH AVENUE
in the City of New York
The Reverend Canon Carl F. Turner, Rector
www.SaintThomasChurch.org

Sunday, December 24, 2020
Christmas Eve

Solemn Eucharist of the Nativity

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A Sermon by
The Reverend Matthew Moretz, *Associate Rector*
on
Isaiah 9:2-4, 6-7; Titus 2:11-14; and Luke 2:1-20
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What Melts the Heart?

What melts the heart? An unexpected and kind gesture? A heartfelt note? Soaring yet tender orchestration? The transporting scent of your childhood in the air? The yelps of a newborn puppy?

We cherish when this sort of thing happens, when the fullness of life's wonder pours out of a shining moment, somehow from one small instance all of Creation is made fresh and new. And in that moment, we find revealed to us evermore about our life that is hidden most of the time, but there all along. What *is* revealed is that part of us is just waiting, waiting to melt. If we reflect a bit, we know that there is this hard part of us, frost-bitten by the bleak mid-winters of life. With each loss, with each heartbreak, a layer of a kind of shell is cast around our delicate center. With every trial, it can be as if our soul becomes ever more armor-plated. Our trust and our hope and our faith can become calloused and dulled, making us so clumsy at loving each other, or even ourselves, with Christ-like abandon.

But when your heart melts, that all changes, not by convincing you with an argument, or forcing you by decree, but by something breaking into our broken world, the light of sheer beauty and truth that can beam with such intense purity that no armored soul can withstand it. As God said to the prophet Ezekiel: "A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh."

And if you ponder all this in your heart, you may find that our Christmastide, finally here after so many weeks of activity and preparation, indeed after many months of true tribulation, *this* Christmas, nevertheless, still holds great promise to draw us close together in the Spirit, supported by our broad networks, to look upon one of the greatest heart-melting events in history. We are drawn together, in our bleak mid-winter, to look upon the one we celebrate tonight: the One who has come to us in the most heart-melting form imaginable. In the form of a baby.

As we know, *any* baby has the power to overcome a room with warmth and joy. The soft skin. The tiny fingers and nails. The sounds of gulping milk. That baby smell. All of it can make us forget our

troubles, leave aside our worries, and, if for a moment, bask in the glow of a cherubic presence. This is the power that *every* baby has: to transcend the world by being a deeply wondrous part of this world. Though we may walk in darkness, it is this sort of in-breaking wonder that has us seeing a great light.

This is how Christmas' wonder is given to us. Maybe we aren't surprised by this timeless image anymore, but we should be! This scene, this gift, is the source of an ever-flowing ecstasy at the heart of Christian life. The first glimpse that we ever had of God's full presence, the whole kit and kaboodle, is as a baby.

You would think that God would choose to set the world right by coming from heaven on a chariot surrounded by angels with great fanfare, like divine royalty. As Isaiah expected, "The Lord will bare his holy arm before the eyes of all the nations." Yet we do not receive God in some mature strength, for the hand of that newly-born arm could barely grasp one of your fingers.

Instead, we see that immature, tender weakness as the visible sign of God's entrance into our broken world. *This* is how God angles a way into our life, beyond our calluses and shells and armor. In suspense. In peril. In the beauty and the joy of a successful birth. Not through the veil of the Temple, but through the holy portal of a poor mother's womb. God comes with soft skin and tiny fingers to peel the callouses from our hearts, to make straight the path for the full love and life of God.

Tonight, this baby, newly born, is not only encompassed by the Holy Family, shepherds, angels, animals, but also by you and me, and every Christian on earth, the dead, the living, and those yet to be born, all, in the Spirit, looking down, into the makeshift crib of a feeding trough, to have our hearts made tender again. To have our hearts melted by "this reflection of God's glory" not from above, but from below. How many hearts do you think that baby has melted, since it was born? Could they even be counted? Could you count yourselves among them? Even now, in our bleak mid-winter?

If you do, especially if you do on this night, know that that blessing has a purpose. That ecstasy is more than the endorphins. More than the feel-good feelings of market-tested Christmas. This night's promise, its beauty and wonder, all of it is meant to be the foundation for your entire life. The chief cornerstone, in fact.

One reason why babies are so cute is so that the mother and others in the family will bond with the child. And in that being bonded and being smitten, that serves as the first steps of a mutual life that will be, actually, quite difficult and hard, at times. The baby will need to be protected, at great cost. The baby will cry, at great length. And the baby will sometimes not be cute, but perhaps more disgusting than one could ever predict. But that first glimpse of the baby's smile, that first sniff of the baby's smell, well!, a little bit of that that can be enough fuel for a lifetime, for the giving of the entire self so that another may live and thrive and grow.

This is how God comes to us. Not just to lift our hearts, but to lift our hearts *so that* we might take our whole selves and this whole world into a reflection of that glory. This is a gift of God that turns us into a gift of God. When we get that first glimpse of God's full presence in this world, God wants us to be smitten. God wants us to bond with Him, like a mother to her child.

Because, and here is the counter-intuitive reality of Christ's presence with us, God needs us. Or, rather, God in love has become so very vulnerable, and in that tenderness, God has taken such a risk with us. We can say yes. But we can also say no. We can nurture that baby. Or, like Herod, we can pursue him, seek him harm. We can scheme to snuff out the light of God in our world. And, oftentimes, there is little to stop such dreadful power. And so God's presence in this world cries out in the night to be protected and nurtured, at great cost. We will hear the same cries of God in our neighbor, at great length, and even at great distance. And it is our charge to listen. And to act. To grow in love and then live in love.

We need all the help we can get, you know. This baby, this child that we dote upon and love so dearly, you watch him as he grows. Learn from him. Follow him and you will see the best that this world can be. You will see signs and wonders. Love and mercy beyond the bounds of polite society. Creation out of nothing. Life and healing where all was thought to be lost. But if you follow him, you will also see the worst that the world can be, directed full force upon his head. Piercing his mother's heart, and piercing our own. But, I beg you, don't stop there. If you keep following him through that valley of shadows, you will find revealed light in even the deepest darkness, blessing among those who mourn, evil forces subdued by cavernous mercy, you will discover life on the other side of death itself. Keep tabs on that baby. Every tab you can.

For the life that God begins in us may end up to be more difficult and troublesome than we could ever imagine. Love is a long road. Love is costly. But, by heaven, love is worth it. And it is in the sublime light of Christmas, in the sight of this beautiful infant Christ, that the wonder of life is brought so very close, in the flesh, in the spirit. And in that divine humanity, for now so small and delicate, our melted hearts can get a foretaste of the heavenly banquet here on earth, and even just a taste, we know, is enough for a lifetime.

*"Our God, heav'n cannot hold him, nor earth sustain:
Heav'n and earth shall flee away when he comes to reign:
In the bleak mid-winter a stable place sufficed
The Lord God Almighty Jesus Christ."*