
'I Love Me Some Incarnation!'

**A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Thee Smith
Christmas Day – Year A**

One of my favorite sermons to listen to on the internet tells the story of a seminary dean who had three daughters. The story describes the day when the youngest daughter made an outburst in church, right in front of everybody during the worship service. I suspect she was just old enough to start realizing what it meant that she was being raised to be a preacher's kid. At the same time she was evidently *young enough* to have fewer inhibitions than the rest of us. So you know the way that younger children can say things so innocently? — things that the rest of us are also thinking, but know better than to say out loud? But then our children just say those things out loud, right?

So here's the story recorded online and told by the former dean of our Episcopal seminary in New York, General Theological Seminary. Dean Kurt Dunkle tells this story that he heard when he and his wife, Lisa, were seminary students themselves, back-in-the-day at General. And they heard it from the man who was dean at that time, the Very Rev. Ward Ewing. Dean Ewing was recalling his days as a preacher starting out at a small country church in Tennessee. One day, as he was getting up to preach, that youngest daughter of his stood up in the front pew and said,

"Jesus! Jesus! Jesus! That's all he ever talks about, Jesus!" (<https://youtu.be/y6GhXRyqYEK>; 0:50-1:30; 40 seconds)

Well, of course, and that's what we're also here to do today: to talk about 'Jesus, Jesus, Jesus!' And we do that especially here today, when we celebrate the birthday of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Now celebrating any birthday always reminds me of something else. It's one of those comedy birthday cards that I once came across. On the cover the card says, 'So it's your birthday.' And then you open the card and it says on the inside, 'It's always got to be about you.'

Well, of course, it's always got to be about you. It's your birthday! And of course, today it's got to be about Jesus. It's his birthday!

But also today, all of us celebrating Jesus' birthday have an opportunity to reaffirm, or else begin, our own incarnation as a type of Christ person—our own identity as a Christlike or Christian person. After all, that's what the label 'Christian' originally meant: back in Antioch, the Book of Acts says, so many centuries ago when we were first called followers of Christ (Acts 11.26). But later in church history to be a Christian meant, more essentially: "having the manner and spiritual character proper to a follower of Christ." (<https://www.etymonline.com/search?q=christian>)

So that's what we're here to do today: not only to celebrate our Lord's incarnation as the Christ child, but also to avail ourselves of a sublime opportunity. Every year we get to renew or again, perhaps for the first time, to initiate our own identity as an incarnation of the Christ-Spirit.

Now this is a sensitive topic for me, because of a youthful boast I made many years ago in front of my school assembly. I was attending a mostly white school in the 1960s, and like Dean Ewing's youngest daughter, I too was waking-up to an ongoing identity. I was beginning to fathom what it meant to be African American in our predominantly white culture here in the United States. And in that speech, I wanted to make sure everyone understood that I was a new kind of black person who would not tolerate being thought of as primitive on the one hand, or as an ultra-religious black churchgoer on the other. So listen to how I said it back then:

"I will neither eat with my fingers nor babble to you about how much I love Jesus." Wow! That's how I affirmed my ethnic identity as a seventeen-year-old back in 1968. And now, as we say here in the South: 'Honey chile, look at me now!'

Here I stand before you now, a priest of our church, and apparently not babbling, and certainly not primitive. But still I'm here to announce and expound how much I love Jesus. Or in today's black idiom, '*I love me some Jesus!*' Yes indeed, it may sound like babbling to some. But now I'm ready to risk that, some fifty years later, as I declare: 'I love me some Lord and Savior Jesus Christ!'

And how about you? Where or how have you been—or how are you now trying –to incarnate the Christ-Spirit in this season of your life? You don't need to be ultra-religious either. But you might 'wanna be' if you fall in love with Jesus the way some of us have.

Now, as an incentive to fall in love with Jesus, either for the first time or all-over-again, we get two choices every Christmas season:

1) We get the Christ-child in the nativity story; that story many of us heard retold yesterday in so many glorious Christmas eve worship services. Some services were humble and some majestic, but all were Spirit-filled in celebration of the Christ.

2) But in addition to those nativity stories today we get some of the most sublime and exalted descriptions of Jesus in all holy scripture:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God . . .

and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him . . .

But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory . . . full of grace and truth (John 1:1, 10, 12-14).

Church family, Christian friends and friends of Christ, how may we become more and more like him: "full of grace and truth?" Let's avail ourselves of the opportunities in this holy season. Starting with the twelve days beginning now, and throughout Epiphany season in the new year ahead, may we become living manifestations of his grace and truth.

In the name of God, and in honor of the incarnation of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, Amen.