

**Homily: John 1:1-14 : Christ Episcopal Church, Valdosta, GA
Friday, December 24, 2021, Christmas Eve
The Rev. David W. Perkins, Th.D.**

The German poet, Friedrich Hölderlin wrote in his poem "Patmos"

Like fire

Are the voices of God. Yet it is hard

In great events to preserve what is great.

[Friedrich Hölderlin, "Patmos," in *Selected Poems and Fragments*, trans. Michael Hamburger, ed. Jeremy Adler, preface and intro, Michael Hamburger (New York: Penguin, 1998), p. 247.]

As we celebrate tonight the nativity of our Lord, can we take a fresh look at this great event, can we hear again the fire-like voice of God and preserve what is great? Consider this language from some of the Christmas lectionary readings:

Hebrews 1

In these last days he has spoken to us by a Son,

**'You are my Son;
today I have begotten you?'**

Or again,

**'I will be his Father,
and he will be my Son?'**

**And again, when he brings the firstborn into the world, he says,
'Let all God's angels worship him.'**

John 1

He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him.

**And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory,
the glory as of a father's only son, * full of grace and truth**

We are confronted here with a great event – the Son of God, second person of the Triune Godhead, coming to us in a personal way, in a human life, as an infant, a child, a teenager. God's Son becoming vulnerable in that child. This great event confronts us with the ultimate worth and value of infants and children and with God's unique ways of coming to us.

The Spirituality of Children

The Roman Catholic thinker, John S. Dunne once observed that children may have a more primal knowledge of God than adults.

"Children are nearer to the darkness out of which man comes when he is born. If God lives in that darkness, then the child may be in a better position to understand him.."

[John S. Dunne, *A Search for God in Time and Memory* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame UP, 1969), p. 170-71.]

We often expect children to verbalize their understanding of God in adult terms before we will allow them to receive Holy Communion, etc. They obviously cannot do that, but they do have ways of exhibiting their rather primal experience of God, an experience not yet caught in adult images and language. And, do we as adults "understand" Holy Communion?

We need to remind ourselves, in the words of Sam Portaro that
" . . . God chose to come to us in innocence, in openness, and in the very incarnation of possibility."

[Sam Portaro, *Brightest and Best: A Companion to the Lesser Feasts and Fasts* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley, 1998), p. 17.]

God could not honor and elevate the value of children more than by enfleshing God's self in a child, by sharing in their unique vulnerability and powerlessness. The baby Jesus had to be nursed, dressed, and protected from the purge of King Herod by being transported into Egypt. He could not flee on his own.

In the faces of these children, we behold the human face of God, an infinite possibility and a raw primal experience of God's loving presence. In the words of the German poet Rilke:

I have faith in all those things that are not yet said.

I want to set free my most holy feelings.

What no one has dared to want.

will be for me impossible to refuse.

....

If that is presumption, then, my God forgive me.

However, I want to tell you this one thing:

**I want my best strength to be like a shoot,
with no anger and no timidity, as a shoot is;**

this is the way children love you.

[*Selected Poems of Rainer Maria Rilke*, ed. and trans. by Robert Bly. Harper, 1981, p. 22-23.]

Hospitality to Children

Jesus in Mark 10 embraced a child that his followers had discouraged parents from bringing to Jesus and told them that they had to receive him like a child. Could that in part mean that we are to receive God in the shape and person of the child?

We can reverence children by seeking to form them and teach them our faith while listening to their unique, rather primal experience of God. We can understand that they are learning how to live by watching us.

This same Jesus was protected from the purge of Herod, recorded in Matthew. The Feast of Holy Innocents follows Christmas by three days--Herod's killing of infants two years and younger in an effort to eliminate Jesus as a political threat. Herod displayed a dreadful lack of heart of hospitality; Jesus' parents were forced to flee to protect him.

As we celebrate this holy event, preserving what is great about it demands that we renew our awareness of the plight of children. Imagine a church where people scowl at you because your children are noisy. Little ones try to speak out to answer the sound of the priest's voice or the sounds of people singing or reading. What a joyful sound. "Out of the mouths of babes"—that IS in Scripture.

It belongs to the center of the Christian message that children are not properties to own and rule over, but gifts to cherish and care for. Our children are our most important guests, who enter into our home, ask for careful attention, stay for a while and then leave to follow their own way."

[Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Reaching Out* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1979), p. 56]

Children die each day by the thousands. According to UNICEF 25,000 children die per day under 5 of all causes--hunger, malnutrition, etc. That's 35 per second. The figures are down from ten years ago by one third but remain dreadfully high.

According to Child Help

Agencies receive 3.2 million reports of abuse yearly involving 6.6 million children, That's about 1 every 10 seconds.

My invitation to you

Let us renew our commitment to receive children as if we were receiving Christ in them.

Let us resolve to put our best selves forward in the teaching and forming of our children in the faith community.

Let us throw ourselves into the battle to protect and save children from abuse, starvation, and disease. We can get involved as volunteers and we can give our money to organizations that work for the benefit of children.

Finally, we can look into our own lives at the unlived potential God has placed there. What lies unborn within us as adults? What possibilities, God given, have yet to emerge and sprout?

Remember Rilke's words

**I want my best strength to be like a shoot,
with no anger and no timidity, as a shoot is;
this is the way children love you.**

**If I were alone in a desert
and feeling afraid.
I would want a child to be with me.
For then my fear would disappear
and I would be made strong.
This is what life in itself can do
because it is so noble, so full of pleasure
and so powerful.**

Meister Eckhart