

Christmas Eve, 2007 – “Hugging God”

Ahhhhh, finally, Christmas Eve is here. Whew! After all the busy-ness, after all the exhausting preparations, this is the night. The stockings are hung, the decorations are up, the lights are twinkling, the pantry is groaning with food ready to be eaten, the presents are piled under the tree. It is a beautiful night, for it is the night we celebrate our dear Saviour's birth. It is the night we reflect back to that most special of nights, when a long time ago, in a distant land occupied by a foreign army, God touched the earth, and the lives of people forever.

We love the story, and we can probably recite most of it from heart. We could say that we recite it from memory, but that seems too much of the head, a bit too cold and aloof and remote. This is a story that we recite from the heart, for it is a story of love, of heavenly love that covers all of creation.

It is a tender and intimate story, isn't it? In only a few words we have the complete picture of a young couple becoming parents far from their home. In a moment, fear and uncertainty changed to joy and rejoicing, as a child is born, and is lovingly touched, wrapped in warm dry cloths and laid in a soft bed of sweet-smelling hay. (When we in the city hear about a stable, we tend to think of an uncomfortable place, full of animals and corresponding yukky animal smells, but those of us who have been blessed with the experience of coming into a warm barn on a cold and snowy night can still recall the sweet, sweet smell of hay.) In the shelter of that stable, a young woman gives birth, and their lives and ours are changed forever.

While it was a perfectly normal, quite unremarkable birth, it was at the same time a birth unlike any other. A birth so different from any other that even heaven couldn't keep quiet about it. An angel of the Lord found some poor shepherds hanging out on a hillside, and just had to blurt out the good news about this special birth. An ordinary birth in so many ways - and yet a birth so very unique that even the glory of the Lord lit up that hillside as the angel told these poor shepherds just how special this baby was, a Saviour, the Messiah, the Christ, the Lord.

Pause for a moment, and consider the impact of that birth. There, in a tiny baby, was the opportunity to hug God. There was the chance for Mary, and Joseph, and all who came in peace to hold the baby, and to hug God. The very thought of hugging God boggles the mind!

The English language has some delightful quirks, not the least of which is that the same word can have quite different meanings. Take for example that word “hugging.” As a transitive verb it means what we just thought about ... the action of hugging God through hugging the baby Jesus. What a wondrous picture that is of God becoming vulnerable in that birth, in becoming flesh and dwelling among us.

But there's another form of the word “hugging” and that is the adjective form, in which the term “hugging” becomes descriptive and the term “hugging God” takes on a whole new meaning – referring to a God who hugs. What a delightful thought that is, isn't it? In the incarnation of God in Jesus we have a God who not only is huggable but who wraps us warmly in loving arms of grace and mercy and forgiveness and comfort and joy. Ponder a moment on that reflective action – holding God safely in ones arms, and being held safely in God's arms. That birth in Bethlehem introduces to us a whole new understanding of God, and God's care for people, and God's love for us, and God's openness to being loved by us.

And with that incredible action of grace by God all heaven let loose with celebration – a multitude of the heavenly host praising God. Shepherds awed by this display (who wouldn't be?!) - but quickly recovering and going into Bethlehem to visit with the new baby – perhaps even to hold and to hug the baby. They were the first in a long series of people who would come to pay their respects to this totally unique child, the son of Mary, the Son of God – the first in a long series of people who would witness how God had touched history, and who would witness how they themselves had been touched by God.

And so now it's our turn, as we this night join the long series of people across the ages come to witness. We too have come to pay our respects at the feet of the Holy Child who came that we might have life, abundant and eternal. The Holy Child, the Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Son of the Most High, Jesus, our Lord and our King. As we come before Him, once again hear the story, let it wash over you, hold it in your hearts, embrace that young couple, and above all embrace the Holy Child in your hearts as well, preparing Him room, and experiencing in Him the touch of God healing you, restoring you, uplifting you, until at last we all shall be embraced in His loving arms for all time.