

## Children of God

Isaiah 52:1-10; Psalm 149; Galatians 4:4-7; John 1:1-14

### *Prayer for Illumination*

Ever-present God, Gracious Father, who from the womb of the Virgin Mary brought new life to all humanity; Grant to us your Holy Spirit, that hearing your Word we might receive it by faith, and thereby be born again, born from on high, and so be your sons and daughters for eternity. Through Jesus Christ, Son of Mary, Son of God. Amen.

*Hughes Oliphant Old*

### *Celebrating Christmas*

It is the time of year when the whole world celebrates the birth of Jesus. Some celebrate by going to church, some by singing carols, some by baking treats, some by decorating a tree, some by giving gifts to family and friends, some by getting drunk. Most people celebrate Christmas in several of these ways, and that is good. *Very* good. Except for getting drunk. The birth of Jesus was the turning point of history, and it is good that the world celebrates this fact, even if they do not know what they are celebrating. Christians *do* know what they are celebrating. We are celebrating God come to save us from our sin.

The world knows how wretched we are – the wars, famines, sexual exploitation, poverty, etc. – and the world grieves these ills. But the world always misdiagnoses the problem. The world blames our ills on capitalism, or communism; poverty, or wealth; too much government, too little government, or bad government, lack of education, or control by elites, etc. From one decade to the next, solutions are railroaded through which at best solve a few problems while making others worse, and at worst increase the misery level across the board. What the world never understands is that the suffering of the human race arises out of sin which is rooted in each one of us. Alexadr Solzhenitsyn said that the line between good and evil runs through each human heart, but the world cannot grasp this – or does not want to. For this is a truth too painful to bear. If the problem with mankind is mankind itself, there is no hope. So the world grasps at what passing pleasures it can find, and one of these is Christmas. It is fitting that He who came once to feed the hungry throngs should each year bring some joy to those who find little of it all year long.

But for Christians, the Feast of the Nativity is a much deeper occasion. We sing, “Joy to the world, the Lord is come! Let earth receive her King!” This helpless babe was the help the world so desperately needed, and we rejoice that Jesus reigns over all nations. The solution to government failure is the rule of Jesus, the solution to oppression and exploitation is the love of Jesus, the solution to poverty and lack of education is the wisdom of Jesus. Jesus has come to help us! And for 2,000 years He has been making this present world a better place. Praise God! But there is more. Christians celebrate the permanent, eternal solution to all our ills. Sin, which is more than an act of disobedience, has been defeated. This innocent baby grew up to become the sacrifice which paid for all of our sins – *all* of our sins – past, present, and future – so that we might be forgiven of our sins and escape God’s anger. For Christians Christmas is more than a world-wide celebration of the birth of the Righteous King – it is the beginning of a personal friendship with All-mighty God. It is wonderful, and necessary, that sin be defeated – but it seems too good to be true that *our* sin has been defeated, *our* sins have been forgiven, that this God who came as a baby to rule is always with us to protect and comfort us. For Christians, Christmas makes us giddy with delight! But Christians also miss the full impact of Christmas.

### *What Jesus Came to Do*

“What Child is This?” That is the pivotal question for every generation. And while many who celebrate Christmas give little thought to who Jesus was, others answer in various ways. Thoughtful people everywhere recognize Jesus as a great teacher. Muslims consider Him to be a prophet. Christians consider Jesus to be the Messiah of Israel, the Son of God, the Savior of the world. Most people of all faiths think that

Jesus came to make us good. That was the intended result of His teaching. That is what was expected of His prophetic ministry. That is why Jesus came to rule the world. In a world of violence, of hatred, of untold misery, of darkness – what was needed was peace, love, harmony, and light. That is what Jews, Greeks, and Romans longed for, and today that is what men and women, Christian and Muslim, capitalist and communist long for. Only a small handful of psychopaths truly delight in suffering. Most people want to return to the garden – even when they act like they do not belong there. And since we know that God loves and blesses His people, we think that He sent Jesus to end all strife and make us good. What a shame. This expectation is too small for Jesus. The Son of God came to do much more than make us good. He came to make us god.

St. Athanasius said, “The Son of God became man, that we might become god.” Now Athanasius did not mean that we become a deity. He noted that verse 12 of our gospel lesson teaches that when we receive Jesus, we become children of God. And if children of God, then we share God’s nature, although without becoming a deity.

When you woke up this morning, is this what you thought about yourself? Did you yawn and stretch and think, “What a wonderful day to be a child of God?” When you go to work or to school, are you aware that you are a child of God in the midst of children of Adam? This is identity issue, isn’t it? We discussed last week how vital it is to be clear about your identity. If you do not know who you are, nothing in life makes sense. Take Tom Brady for example, the quarterback of the New England Patriots. When the opposing team loses possession of the ball and the Patriot offense takes the field, how bizarre would it be for Tom Brady to stay on the bench? “Tom, get out there,” coach Belichick barks. Tom Brady says, “Coach you need to send a quarterback out there.” Wait, I cannot even finish this scenario. It is *too* bizarre! It is preposterous for the greatest quarterback in the NFL to forget who he is. But that is how Christians behave. We act as though this world needs Jesus to return, when there are millions of sons of God here right now. Jesus *will* return and finish the work of salvation, but in the meantime He has placed powerful children of God on earth to continue His work.

### ***Children of God***

If you believe in Jesus, you *are* a child of God. This is not a command, or a goal, or a wish. It is a fact. You might look like the people around you, but looks are deceiving. When you received Jesus, God transformed you into a new human being. Before you were a descendant of Adam and possessed his nature – a tendency to sin, a desire to sin, a love of sinning. Now God has incorporated you into the new race that started with Jesus. You are now a descendant of Jesus and possess His nature – a tendency to holiness, a desire to live a holy life, a love of holiness. Jesus came, not to make us good, but to make us god – to reconstruct the humanity race into a god-like race.

Some of you find this hard to believe. You look the same as you have always looked. You have the same voice and the same strengths and weaknesses. Furthermore, you do still sin. So how could it be true that we are a reconstructed race? The answer is that Jesus is rebuilding our race while we are still in it. When we die we will be resurrected in perfect holiness, but for now our old natures and our new natures overlap. This can be confusing. It confused the apostle Paul. In Romans chapter seven he recounts how confused he was by his sincere desire to do right, but his tendency to do wrong. God is rebuilding each of us individually, but it is a process that will take a lifetime. Day by day it can be hard to see the effects of God’s work, but over the decades we can see God snuffing out our old sinful nature as He recreates us with a new, godly nature.

And through this process you have your three enemies constantly warring against you. Jesus defeated Satan, sin, and the world, so they have no power over you. Satan is completely powerless to cause you to sin. Your old sinful nature is completely powerless to produce acts of sin in you. The world around

you is completely powerless to influence you to sin. You know that, don't you? Actually, most Christians do not. Most Christians hear Satan whisper, "That fifth glass of wine is irresistible. You do not have the willpower to resist. You might as well drink it." Most Christians feel the sin in them urge them to repeat slanderous gossip. "It is not really that bad, and besides – that hussy deserves to be taken down. Do it!" Most Christians hear the world calling, "Join us! Sex is natural and fun. It is unreasonable to deny yourself." And they cannot resist. That is what they think. But it is all a lie. The truth is you *can* resist. Like a hologram, if you push against these lies, you find nothing there. You are children of God! You are the people who live holy lives. You are the people who possess divine power. You are the lights who expose the darkness of lies and drive them away.

So why don't we expose the darkness? Why do we crumple in the face of temptations? Why do Christians so often act much like the world around us? Because we forget who we are. There is only one reason why Tom Brady would remain on the bench when it is time to take the field. It is if he forgot he was the quarterback. He will never do that, will he? But Christians do it all the time. We forget that we are children of Almighty God. When it is time to take the field in the face of some darkness, we allow ourselves to be confused by Satan, the sin within us, and the world. We think that we cannot resist the darkness, so we give up and cave in. The lie sounds so plausible, so beautiful, so wonderful – we forget that it is a lie, we forget that it will evaporate before our light. We forget, and so we give in.

What can be done? We need to remember who we are. Scripture can help us here. One of the reasons we should read and hear scripture every day is so that we will remember who we are and will not be deceived by the lie. We can remind each other. As we see each other and interact by phone, email, and social media, we can remind each other that we are children of God and have the power to resist the lie. We can remind ourselves. Some of you may find it helpful to post notes on your bathroom mirror or computer desktop, above the sink or in your cubicle – a note which might say something like, "You are a child of God. Do not be deceived by lies." You will find that in time you will have a stronger sense that you are a child of God and will more aware of the lies that come your way.

### ***The Presence of God***

There is much that could be said about the children of God, but this morning we will consider three aspects: presence, holiness, and power. **First, presence.** Did you ever notice in the Bible that whenever God is present, people take notice? No one can miss Him! God appeared to Abraham in a smoking firepot. He appeared to Moses in the burning bush. He appeared to Joshua before the battle of Jericho. He appeared to Isaiah in the temple, just to mention a few instances. And in every case, people noticed. Noticed? They were blown away! Now, we are not God. But we are the children of God. When we enter a community, people notice. Our presence makes a difference. We are the light of the world and the salt of the earth. Simply by being present we drive out the darkness and preserve our communities. Not perfectly, not permanently – but truly.

The application to this is that we ought to stand up, go out, engage our community in all sorts of ways – in work and school and business, etc. It is sad to see some Christians cower in isolation out of fear of the world. We are the children of God! No one is likely to come up to you and congratulate you on your godliness. In fact the world is more likely to persecute you for standing for your Christian convictions. But they will notice and be influenced. Christmas is a perfect example of this principle. All sorts of people with all sorts of religions celebrate Christmas without even knowing who Christ is. That is because Christians unashamedly celebrate Christmas, and the world gets swept up in our holiday. You may object to an immoral practice at work or in government, and perhaps no will pay attention you. Business continues as usual. Wrong. Often people will not immediately change, but your voice will resonate through the hearts and minds of those around you. That is not because you have such a powerful voice. It is because when God

speaks, people listen – and you are a child of God. When you speak, people will be changed. The *presence* of children of God changes a community.

### ***The Holiness of God***

**Second**, the children of God are a holy people. This is because God is holy. This no doubt makes sense, but is it really true? Most of us struggle with sin, and some Christians seem to be losing the battle. The recent sex scandals in the church make Christians seem more like enthusiastic sinners than like saints. And it does not take much effort to think of Christians in your neighborhood who do not really seem very holy. Furthermore, those Christians who do seem to have their act together and never sin tend to act offensively self-righteous. Yes, you would think that children of God should be holy, but it sure does not seem to be the case. And besides, we began this message saying that God did not come to make us good. So now are we retracting that statement?

No. The reason that God did not come to make men good is that it cannot be done. Children of Adam sin because they want to sin, they like to sin, it is inherent to their nature to sin. You can prevent individual acts of sin, but only by force – which is why God instituted civil government and gave to the state the legitimate use of force. But when our nature changes, behavior follows. Children of God do good not by coercion, but out of a holy nature. Children of God no longer want to sin – they want to obey God. Children of God no longer like to sin – they hate sin and like doing good. Children of God are by nature inherently righteous. Oh yeah, you say? “I know Christians who enjoy sin very much. They claim to believe in Jesus, but they have no desire to obey God.” First, some people who claim to believe in Jesus really do not. There are people who make fraudulent claims to faith. Jesus Himself said, “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven.” (Matthew 7:21) Until Jesus returns there will be imposters among us. But they are fakes, and they do not invalidate the truth about real believers. And that truth is that everyone who believes in Jesus becomes a child of God.

Some of you sitting here today may be nervously shuffling in your minds because, honestly, that wonderful description of the children of God does not fit you. You thought you believed in Jesus. You tried to believe in Him. You want to be a Christian. But, truth be told, you sort of like sinning, and you rather resent some of God’s commands. Are you a fraud and unaware of it? Where do you stand with God? Well the fact that you are here and have not left yet is a sign that you belong to God. We are God’s temple and you are part of it, singing, confessing, listening, praying, dining. True frauds cannot endure God’s presence, so they seldom show up in church. True frauds make bold claims, but do not follow through. But that is not true of you. God has brought you here, He has heard your confession and your praise, He is speaking to you, and He will feed you. God is your Father and He loves you as His child. And another aspect of the children of God is that we are children. There is a beginning to life as a Christian, and progress as we mature. When you were born, you were a baby with much potential, but most of it unrealized. In the years following you learned to use your mind and body to walk, talk, sing, fight, and all human activity. You were a human being at birth and that never changed, but your capacities did change until you began to act like other mature human beings. When you were reborn as a child of God you immediately had the potential to act like God, but it was unrealized. You are growing as a Christian, and daily are becoming more like Christ. God is snuffing out your old sinful nature as He recreates you with a new, godly nature.

So it might be more accurate to say that the children of God are *becoming* a holy people. You should be able to identify sinful behavior patterns which used to be true of you, but are no more. This is God working in you to kill the sinful impulses of your old nature and bring to the surface the holy impulses He has placed in you. Be encouraged! God has made you His child and is transforming you! This gives us hope that those sins which still torment us will be put to death some day. Meanwhile, it makes sense for us to aim to live like children of God. Tom Brady is famous for his carefully constructed diet and his meticulous training program. Tom knows that he is the best quarterback in the NFL, and he acts like it. I do not know

if he likes his weird diet or his grueling workouts, but he is a quarterback, and this is how quarterbacks live. You are not some insignificant creature who no one cares about. You are a child of God, and it makes sense to act like one. There will be a lot of missteps along the way, but God is at work in you to make sure that you grow toward maturity. Holiness is your future. Do not live in the past.

### ***The Power of God***

**Third**, children of God possess great power. You are more than a human being. You are greater than the pinnacle of an evolutionary process. You are not the child of some tribal deity or weakling god. You are the child of Almighty God, Creator and Ruler of the Universe. Your Father has absolute, unlimited power – and you are born of Him. Of course your power is not absolute and unlimited, but it is substantial. You control the course of history and the destiny of nations. Do you think I am exaggerating? Listen to Psalm 149 as it speaks about the people of God:

- 6 Let the high praises of God be in their throats \*  
*and two-edged swords in their hands,*
- 7 to execute vengeance on the nations \*  
*and punishments on the peoples,*
- 8 to bind their kings with chains \*  
*and their nobles with fetters of iron,*
- 9 to execute on them the judgment written! \*  
*This is honor for all his godly ones. Praise the LORD!*

Who binds kings with chains and executes judgment on nobles? The people of God! Which of God's people? All of God's people! Friends, the future of our world is in our hands. God has given us the power to bring down the mighty and promote the humble – if we will use it.

Now there are many ways this power can be misunderstood, and we will touch on only a few today. *One*, God does not grant us power to engage in silliness. You do not have power to levitate the cat. Our power is activated in service to God's Kingdom. *Two*, God's power in us is not often instantaneous – but that does not make it less real. Godly people on both sides of the Iron Curtain prayed and acted to bring down the communist governments of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. Those prayers were offered for several decades, until in a moment communism collapsed like a house of cards. What nuclear arms could not accomplish, God's children accomplished, but it took a while. *Three*, God's power in His children is not often expressed in force of arms. The two-edged sword is commonly a symbol of God's word, and we exert enormous power as we proclaim the gospel everywhere we go. The children's rhyme is false. "Sticks and stone may break my bones, but words will never hurt me." Nonsense. The words of God heal and hurt, exalt and destroy. We have those words. Let us unleash their terrible power to heal our land, save our neighbors, and change our world.

### ***The Word of God***

Which brings us back to the beginning of our gospel lesson, where St. John introduces us to the eternal Word who "became flesh and dwelt among us." Jesus is the true Word, the original Word, the omnipotent Word, the Word of salvation and comfort. And we, children of God, are made in His image and thus each of us is a word. We are a word to our neighbors by our presence. We are a word in our communities by our holiness. And we are a word for the world by our power. You are the hope of the world because the Hope of the world comes through you. You are the comfort of the hurting and the salvation of the lost. Do not doubt your true identity! Go into the world to comfort and conquer with Jesus!

Children need to be well-fed in order to stay healthy and grow to maturity. Today God is serving you a two-course meal. We just had the first course – God's word in scripture – and in a moment God will serve us the second course – the bread and wine. As we hear God's word and eat His Supper week by week,

we grow stronger and stronger. So come, with the energy and excitement of hungry children, to receive Jesus in the Supper.

*Prayer*

Lord God, thank you for making us your dear children. We are overwhelmed by your wisdom and generosity and love! We never would have thought of this, and we struggle to grasp what you did. We thought you came to make us good, and we struggle to be good, and we pester each other to be good. But instead you made us Your children, and you love us as Your children, and we have the promise of overcoming sin as we grow. But Father, we keep forgetting we are Your children! Help us to remember. Help us to remind each other. Help us to follow Jesus' example and plunge into the world so that our presence will brighten this dark age. Make us holy. Teach us to wield our tremendous power with great humility, wisdom, and courage. For Your glory and the salvation of the world, through Your Son, Jesus Christ, who was born to make us children of God. Amen.

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