

# The Holy Family

Rev. Clinton G. Roberts   Luke 2:1-20   December 24, 2022   First Presbyterian Church of Lake Forest

Look around you for just a moment, dear friends, and see whom God has gathered together on this blustery Christmas Eve—from each generation to the next.

Last week, we were gathered in the same place for the annual Children’s Christmas Pageant, a cherished First Pres. tradition for many generations. Last week was especially meaningful because first, we celebrated the baptisms of Bergen and Isabelle, two deeply-cherished children belonging to the Magnusson and Standiford families—and now to our family, also.

As I held little Bergen in the crook of my arm, and gently poured a palmful of warm water over her head, I murmured the words of the Sacrament: *I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.* And Bergen stirred, opening her eyes—but no crying she made! Dressed in pure white (with just a little urp of milk on her collar), beautiful Bergen, and then lovely Isabelle were sealed by the Spirit into the Body of Christ. For Jesus, the only-begotten Son of the Father, had become their elder brother, too: which makes them part of our family—beloved sisters in Christ.

So imagine what was going through my head when, later on in the pageant, Bergen’s mother, now costumed as an angel, “delivered” the baby Jesus and laid him in the manger. Except this time around—the “him” was a “her”! When it was time for the Benediction, Bergen, who was now the Christ-Child, was placed for a second time in the crook of my arm. And my heart began to warm to what my head knew all along, as Walter J. Burghardt so eloquently put it: *“Christmas means grace, and grace means that in our love, in our fidelity to God, to God’s children, to God’s earth, we bear a striking resemblance to Christ. We are by grace and by gift what Christ is by nature: we are sons and daughters of God.”*

After the service, as I congratulated the sheep and the angels, the shepherds and the kings (along with their parents and grandparents), many a congregant came up and said, *“I remember when it was my son (or daughter) who played Baby Jesus.”* And some of them even confided with a smile, *“I was once in*

*that old manger, too.*” I remembered the song of Mary, which she sang with magnificent praise, *“He shows mercy from one generation to the next, who honors him as God” (Lk. 1:50 CEB)*. From one generation to the next. Look around you, just for a moment. Do you see what Mary’s singing about? *From one generation to the next. “The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases.”* For this is surely so.

It’s been hard this week, watching the news from the treadmill, as I try in vain to compensate for all the Christmas cookies I’ve been eating. It’s been hard to watch the war in Ukraine, and the crisis unfolding at our own borders, as many thousands of people, some of whom have walked all the way here from South America, now huddle beneath the tall, steel palings that separate them from us. I’ve seen families camping along that long, cement embankment, and I’ve seen mothers carrying their children across the muddy waters of the Rio Grande. If America is the Land of Promise, the Rio Grande must seem like the Jordan. I thank God tonight that Jesus came to carry us all across another river, to a land where every child is welcomed and all are invited in.

I don’t know how hard it must have been to travel over a hundred miles from Nazareth to Bethlehem at the end of the Third Trimester, but Joseph and Mary somehow made it (with or without the donkey). And at the end, when her contractions were already quite severe, there was no one waiting to take them into their home; there was no doctor, and no infirmary. Even the door of the inn was shut, as they huddled against the walls of the feedlot—for the time of her delivery had come. One hundred generations later, we can celebrate Christmas tonight in comfort and joy. But on that very first Christmas, it was perilous, and public, and painful--as God became a human being.

What the Story of Christmas still shows me is that we are meant to become human together. From our own southern borders to the war-torn streets of Ukraine; from the drawing rooms of Lake Forest to the cardboard mansions on Lower Wacker Drive—we are all really one family. The human family. *From generation to generation.*

More than 700 years ago, Meister Eckhart wrote, *“There is only one birth—and this birth takes place in the ground and core of the soul...Not only is the Son of the heavenly Creator born in this darkness—but you too are born there as a child of the same heavenly Creator and none other.”* We belong to each other, you see, as we belong to the God who made us in his heavenly image. And that is why every family, no matter what it looks like, or where it comes from, or where it ends up going, --is a holy family, where love is given, and love received.

In the river of our own baptism, the God who became human has brought us to second birth, that we, who are called to carry the Christ-Child now, might find grace enough to become genuinely human (and even somewhat divine), as we set forth to love one another as Jesus has first loved us.

So look around you again, just for a moment. Are we not all one family, on this holiest of nights? For surely God in Christ is with us—nestling in the crook of your heart.

*Let us pray:*

*Be near us, Lord Jesus, we ask thee to stay close by us forever and love us, we pray. Bless all the dear children in thy tender care, and fit us for heaven to live with thee there. Amen.*

*“I invite all of you now, as we sing our medley of carols, to come forward with your ribbon of gold which you were given at the start of the service. The ribbon symbolizes you and your family—and a story which is uniquely your own. Bring your ribbon forward and weave it into one of the tapestries hanging from the Chancel, that we may all see and understand that we are all woven together: one family in Christ.”*