

## “What Child Is This?”

Rev. Debra P. Given, the Presbyterian Church in Leonia

December 24, 2014 Christmas Eve

Isaiah 9:1-11

Luke 2:1-20

Have you ever held a new baby and wondered who it would grow up to be? We have a new grandson at our house, visiting for Christmas. And just as I wondered about my own children, now I gaze at this new little one and wonder, what kind of person will he be in 20 to 30 years? What will he look like? What will he struggle with? What and who will he love? What child is this, sleeping in my arms? What kind of world will he grow up in, and what will he contribute to it?

Maurice read from the prophet Isaiah tonight, “For a child has been born for us, a son given to us.” What child is this that Isaiah spoke of?

Isaiah wrote hundreds of years before Jesus, in the days of Ahaz, King of Judah. Ahaz was facing the prospect of war, sure defeat and subjugation, and a dilemma of how to respond. The prophet urged Ahaz to stand firm and trust God. The nation of Judah, now walking in darkness, in a time of anguish, gloom and fear, would see light and joy. The yoke of oppression would be broken. The bloody boots and clothing of war would be burned up, and an era of peace would come. And the sign this will happen is the birth of a child, who will grow in authority and reign with justice and righteousness, the only true foundation for peace.

The prophet Isaiah probably did NOT have Jesus Christ in mind when he wrote these words. How could the birth of Jesus 700 years later be a sign for Ahaz? The prophecy was most likely fulfilled by the birth of Ahaz’ son, Hezekiah, who did grow up to be a great and faithful king. Still, we read this passage on Christmas to say that this is the way God acts – through things as simple as the birth of a child. And God acted again in the birth of Jesus Christ.

It’s been a violent year in the United States, between reports of torture, fatal police shootings, shootings of police and accusations of racism and injustice. Police officers, who put themselves in places of danger every day, have good reason to fear for their lives. At the same time, people of color feel discriminated against and many have lost any hope for justice. Some people say we are like two nations here, with different opportunities, and different standards of justice. Others see a nation divided by wealth and poverty. In some ways we are a nation walking in darkness.

God shines a light into this darkness, in Jesus Christ, who came as a newborn child on Christmas. This is the way God comes. It’s not a blinding light. It’s not with guns and armored vehicles, and not with angry slogans or even theological principles. God comes as a particular child, a vulnerable, newborn baby, born to a teenage mother and a poor father. God comes in the pain and messiness of birth, as a child who needs to be cared for and loved if he is to grow and thrive. This is the Word of God made flesh, dwelling among us, full of grace and truth. In Christ God brings a message of love, a miracle of joy, a gift of life, and calls us to nurture this gift with love and care.

What child is this? It is every child who calls us to sacrifice and love. Not just our own children, but every child created by God and a message to us of God’s love, no matter who or what they grow up to be. For the child born on Christmas grew up to be a man, a full human being, who shined a light on oppression and injustice, and upheld righteousness as the true basis of peace. And he calls us today to be fully human, and to treat others carefully and respectfully, as gifts from God, and love others as God loves us. May we welcome this child into our lives tonight, and follow in his way, that the light of God may it shine through us into our world, and lead us out of this darkness. Amen.