

Pastor Gregory P. Fryer
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
12/24/2013, Christmas Eve
Luke 2:1-20
Becoming Young Again

In the name of the Father and of the † Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

If you should like a title for this evening's sermon, I call it "Becoming Young Again." Let's start with this opening text:

¹³And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, ¹⁴Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.
(Luke 2:13-14, KJV)

I bet even the littlest angel in all of heaven would have been proud to be part of this heavenly host singing to the shepherds. The joy and wonder of heaven overflowed onto earth, splashed over onto a field near Bethlehem, and these angels, a vanguard from heaven, praised God and spoke of peace on earth. Wonder of wonders, those angels must have thought, that their Beloved, the only begotten Son of the Father, should leave the beauty and safety of heaven behind and come to this earth of ours for our sake. "He must really love those human creatures," I can imagine the angels thinking.

We ourselves do well, my friends, to be happy and to sing strongly this evening, blending our voices as best we can with heaven's angels. For this is the night when our world grown old begins to become young again.

EPHREM THE SYRIAN

I have borrowed this idea of our old world "becoming young again" from one of the greatest poets and hymn writers of the early church. He is called Ephrem the Syrian (306-373 AD). Forgive a proud Lutheran for making this comparison, but it seems to me that Ephrem the Syrian was an early form of Martin Luther. He was like Luther in being a spiritual and theological giant on the scene, whose gifts were obvious and who helped teach and defend the faith of the church by way of writing hymns. Over four hundred of Ephrem's hymns still exist.

Furthermore, we all have good reason for affection for Ephrem because he seems to have invented the idea of women singing in the church. Where would

we be without the women singing in church? It would be a sad, sad world if our Immanuel Choir, for example, did not include women. A sad world!

But that's how it was in the early church. One of Ephrem's contemporary poets gives him credit for uplifting the women:

The blessed Ephrem saw that the women were silent from praise, and in his wisdom he decided it was right that they should sing out; as Moses gave timbrels to the young girls, so did this discerning man compose hymns for virgins. As he stood among the sisters it was his delight to stir these chaste women into songs of praise. He was like an eagle perched among the doves as he taught them to sing new songs of praise with pure utterance... And the church resounded with the lovely sound of chaste women's voices.¹

Good for Ephrem! That stroke of genius and fairness toward women by itself makes me like him.

But my main reason for mentioning Ephrem is his idea of our world growing young again. This comes from one of Ephrem's Christmas hymns. The interesting refrain goes this way:

Blessed is the Babe by whom Adam and Eve grew young again.²

THE "GLORIOUS EXCHANGE"

You have heard of Jesus and his goodness toward us—how he offered his righteousness to the Father to cover our unrighteousness, his innocence to cover our sins and mistakes and failures of nerve. We are clothed in his righteousness, as in a golden robe. But besides this glorious exchange of righteousness for unrighteousness, St. Ephrem would have us also speak of this good exchange: Jesus exchanged his youth and beauty for our grey hairs and craggy faces. He who is the "rose of Sharon, the fairest of ten thousand" was willing to become bruised and battered for our sake, so that those looking on were appalled by him:

¹ Wilken, Robert Louis (2012-11-27). *The First Thousand Years* (p. 148). Yale University Press. Kindle Edition.

² Wilken, Robert Louis (2012-11-27). *The First Thousand Years* (p. 147). Yale University Press. Kindle Edition.

...many were astonished at him -- his appearance was so marred, beyond human semblance, and his form beyond that of the sons of men – (Isaiah 52:14, RSV)

That's what crucifixion does to you. It mars the human appearance.

As in other good ways, so in this way: Jesus became poor, that you and I might become rich. And Jesus became flesh, so that "Adam and Eve grew young again," and that you and I might grow young again too.

ON BEING OLDER

"To become young again." I used to think that I would enjoy getting old — to being grey-haired and wise and settled and all that. But here I am, old and getting older, and I'm not so sure I like it. For one thing, what's this business about being old and *wise*? I am the one, but do not feel the other: I'm getting older, but I do not feel wiser. I feel the same old mediocre I've always felt.

Meanwhile, the disadvantages of growing older are pretty evident to me. I was once fast and strong. I could leap and dash and had great balance. I imagined that no one would be able to tackle me by just knocking me off stride because my balanced was just too good. That's how I felt about it, back when I was young. Not so much anymore! And when I first came to this city, twenty-two years ago now, everyone seemed to walk too slowly for me. I was always passing them. But now I just quietly trail behind *everyone*. Getting older, slowing down.

Besides these bodily declines, being old means that the world is not quite so full of innocence as it once was. I've just seen too much. I bet you have too. Nor is life abloom with potential as it was when I was young. There are not a thousand paths lying before me, each one looking interesting. In fact, I am at the age when I am just going to have to give up on many paths that seemed good to me. I am not going to be a pianist, for example. Too old to learn. And I'm not going to be a cowboy. Bones are too creaky for riding the range and sleeping on the ground.

REGAINING INNOCENCE AND JOY

But Christmas promises that we shall be young and happy again someday. So, the innocence and excitement and joy you felt, for example, when you were children dashing to the Christmas tree on Christmas morning will be yours again. This is part of what it means to say that on that first Christmas Eve, this old world started to become young again.

And your innocence and excitement and joy will not be the same as naiveté. No, the *nativity* of Jesus does not mean the *naiveté* of his people, but rather the

seasoned innocence and joy of forgiven people who now know that they will not be falling back into sin again. The birth of Jesus means a final victorious break in that weary rhythm of sin, guilt, repentance, and falling back into sin all over again. Christmas means that unto us as been born a *Saviour*, and so the weary old ways of sin are on their way out. They are no longer worthy of us.

The birth of Jesus commences his determined struggle to reconcile this world to God, to re-establish peace and health and innocence again. Flat-out joy will be yours again someday, like children with their Christmas presents. Innocence will be yours again, though a wise innocence.

It will cost Jesus much, but that your life is at stake, and your blessedness and happiness. is what is at stake. He was not born of Mary in a stable in order to live for himself, but for you, to rescue us from the sins and mistakes we have made.

And so “Blessed is the Babe by whom Adam and Eve grew young again,” even Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom belongs the glory with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.