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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
December 25, 2023, The Nativity of our Lord
Isaiah 52:7-10, Hebrews 1:1-4, John 1:1-14

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

Just three weeks ago, on the first Sunday of Advent, we began our pilgrim journey to this Christmas Day with this plaintive cry from the prophet Isaiah.

O that thou wouldst rend the heavens and come down! (Isaiah 64:1)

How often throughout the history of humanity has that cry gone up to God? Maybe not in the same words but with the same sense of urgency. Our world is a mess! We have made it a mess! I daresay that each generation has reason to believe that things are so bad that surely Jesus will come again very soon. And so, we cry: How long, O Lord, how long? Come and set things right! You will hear this cry again and again in the Psalms, the prayer book of the Bible.

And St. Paul says the same thing in his own way in Romans chapter 8 where he writes this:

I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the **children of God**...the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only creation but **we ourselves**, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we **wait for adoption**, the redemption of our bodies... (Romans 8:18-19, 22-23)

And yet, on the night in which Jesus was born, the heavens were indeed torn open as the Word became flesh and God sent His beloved Son to dwell among us. The heavens burst open to reveal to lowly shepherds the holy angels bursting forth with songs of joy that Jesus was born. Glory to God in the Highest, and peace on earth!

Yes, the heavens were rent at Christmas when our Lord Jesus - Immanuel - came to be with us.

The heavens opened again some 30 years later to welcome our resurrected Lord Jesus back into the heavenly realm where he now sits at the right hand of the Father and reigns over all creation. Throughout the Advent season we look forward with hope and longing to the time when the heavens will open once

again, and Jesus will come to finally make all things right and to establish his kingdom here on earth, finally and fully.

So, on this Christmas morning, we celebrate that opening of heaven in which, as St. John puts it, the Word became flesh and dwelt among us full of grace and truth. What a blessing it is that God sent his beloved Son to us in this way. For what better way is there for us to **know our God** than to see him in flesh and blood, just as we are, and yet **not like us** in our inclination toward self-centeredness and sin. In learning to know Jesus of Nazareth, we come to know our God, our Creator, and our Father in heaven.

Long ago, one of the great fathers of the church, St. Irenaeus wrote:

The Word of God, our Lord Jesus Christ... did, through his transcendent love, become **what we are**, that he might **bring us to be even what he is**. — *ST. IRENAEUS*

This saying is usually understood to mean that Jesus became one of us – that is to say, human – so that we might become more like him – that is to say, holy – even divine. And I believe that that is true. Jesus wants us to follow him and, in so doing, become more like him. And we do, with the help of the Holy Spirit, become more like Jesus the more faithfully we follow him and his ways.

But this morning I want to look at this saying in another way. This brings me to my text for this Christmas morning's meditation. This verse comes from the gospel for today, Christmas Day:

But to all who received him, (Jesus) who believed in his name, he gave power to become **children of God** (John 1:12)

The most well-known and much-loved verse in John's gospel is John 3:16:

For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in Him may not perish but may have eternal life. (John 3:16)

So, to paraphrase St. Irenaeus: The beloved Son of God came to become what we are, that he might bring us to be what he is - beloved children of God!

If ever there is a time when we look back on our childhoods, it would be Christmas. Probably each and every one of you could tell stories of Christmas when you were a child. Maybe you didn't get the one gift that you really wanted. Maybe you slept by the Christmas tree or the fireplace so that you

might get to see Santa when he comes down the chimney. We grown-ups don't think of ourselves as children anymore, but in relation to the one whom we call Our Father in heaven, we are yet children. Indeed, we are beloved children. Can you believe that?

Children are often weak and helpless. They need protection and guidance. They need to learn to stay away from danger and not put themselves in risky situations. They need shepherding. They need love and comfort and understanding. They need compassion. Children do not have much power or influence in the world. They may be at the mercy of bullies. Children can easily be kidnapped, or stolen, orphaned, mistreated, or abused. No matter how old we are, we are still children in many ways.

And yet, we are children for whom God sent His beloved Son, that we too might be adopted by God and become His beloved children through Jesus whose love for us led him to the cross where he gave his life to save us. God the Father raised him up from death to live again for us, in us, and with us that we might never, ever be orphaned. Whatever other identities we have in this life – mother, father, spouse, sister, brother, employee, retiree – the most fundamental identity we have is that of children of God – indeed, beloved children of God.

The late great spiritual writer Henri Nouwen writes about his own struggle to believe that he is a beloved child of God. He says:

I don't often "feel" like a beloved child of God. But I know that that is my most primal identity and I know I must choose it above and beyond my hesitations.

Strong emotions, self-rejection, and even self-hatred justifiably toss you about, but you are free to respond as you will. You are not what others, or even you, think about yourself. You are not what you do. You are not what you have. You are a full member of the human family, having been known before you were conceived and molded in your mother's womb. In times when you feel bad about yourself, try to choose to remain true to the truth of who you really are. Look in the mirror each day and claim your true identity. Act ahead of your feelings and trust that one day your feelings will match your convictions. Choose now and continue to choose this incredible truth. As a spiritual practice claim and reclaim your primal identity as beloved daughter or son of a personal creator.

As St. Paul says, all creation groans and we too groan in longing that we might be **revealed** to be the children of God. One day this reality will be revealed and all of heaven and earth will rejoice in our true identity as God's beloved children. Today we rejoice that Jesus, the Son of God, was born to set that plan in motion – to embrace us and welcome us into the family of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

My husband knows that one of my favorite hymns of all time is an old Swedish hymn called Children of the Heavenly Father. It's in our hymnal, LBW 474. I invite you to open to that hymn and sing it with me now, and as you sing, pay attention to the words. Take them into your heart. This hymn is about you.

Children of the Heavenly Father

Truggare kan ingen vara



Tryg - ga - re kan ing - en va - ra än Guds lil - la bar - na - ska - ra,
 1 Chil - dren of the heav'n-ly Fa - ther safe - ly in his bo - som gath - er;
 2 God his own doth tend and nour-ish, in his ho - ly courts they flour - ish.
 3 Nei - ther life nor death shall ev - er from the Lord his chil - dren sev - er;
 4 Though he giv - eth or he tak - eth, God his chil - dren ne'er for - sak - eth;



stjär - nan ej på him - la - fäs - tet, få - geln ej i kän - da näs - tet.
 nest - ling bird nor star in heav - en such a ref - uge e'er was giv - en.
 From all e - vil things he spares them, in his might - y arms he bears them.
 un - to them his grace he show - eth, and their sor - rows all he know - eth.
 his the lov - ing pur - pose sole - ly to pre - serve them pure and ho - ly.

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 Music: TRYGGARE KAN INGEN VARA, Swedish folk tune
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God his children ne'er forsaketh; his the loving purpose solely to
 preserve them pure and holy.

On that first Christmas, the heavens opened, and the Word became flesh – a little child – the Babe of Bethlehem came to us, that he might make us one family of God's beloved children. To Jesus, born of Mary, be the glory, with the Father, and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen