

Okay, admit it -- how many of you actually got to sleep in on Christmas morning? I think it goes without saying, of course, that if you had kids or grandkids in your house between the ages of 2 and 12 you were probably most likely routed out of a warm, comfy bed somewhere between 5 and 7a.m. In fact, depending on the number of bicycles, or Barbie Dreamhouses, or video game consoles you had to assemble on Christmas Eve, you might not have gotten much sleep at all.

Did those of you without young children have to depend on an alarm clock to get going on Christmas morning? I ask this because don't all of us - - whatever our age -- get a little goose-bumpy, inner-smile thrill at the thought of: "It's Christmas!" and want to get out of bed and get going? On Christmas morning most of us are like little children, anxious to enter the experiences awaiting us on that magical day. This year, without having a Christmas Day worship service to lead, I actually got to sleep in a bit.

And yet, in our postmodern culture children often receive mixed messages. On the one hand we speak of those in their childhood years, in hallowed yet wistful tones, as living in the most precious, amazing time of their lives. Our culture makes a big deal -- and big bucks -- isolating kids from the responsibilities of adult life. But there is a fine line between protecting the space and separateness of childhood and keeping children, their concerns and needs, out-of-sight and out-of-mind. And by keeping children's views and their visions safely separated from adults, we close ourselves off from a different kind of interpretation of life itself.

About the only time of year our ambivalence about children seems to mellow into genuine admiration is at Christmas. And rightly so. Not only is the secular, cultural, commercial side of Christmas a celebration of childhood wishes, the true reason for celebrating Christmas, the church's reason, is the birth of a child and the promise that "a little child shall lead them," even save "them" from their sins and save the world from itself.

How ironic than: that just when we find ourselves finally focused on a child, the tradition of the church seems remarkably uninterested in this mindset. Out of four gospels, only Luke and Matthew give us any information about Jesus' actual birth; and only Luke's

Gospel provides us with a few scanty details about incidents in Jesus' actual childhood. This is all we know as witnessed in our Gospel story this morning: Jesus was circumcised, ritually dedicated at the temple in Jerusalem, and then he is taken back to Nazareth to grow up.

As we take a little time to unpack the events that take place in today's narrative, we actually observe that the main characters are all devout individuals, who like Mary and Joseph are faithful in their religious practices. Before we briefly examine their actions and how they pertain to today's message, I think we need to keep in mind that it was essential for these individuals to praise God in all of life. The Jewish law taught that God was to be honored in one's rising up and lying down, in one's going out, and coming in, by how one dressed, and how one ate. Perhaps because religious ritual was a part of their everyday lives this provided Mary, Joseph, Simeon, and Anna, with the ability to recognize and perceive God's actions.

Unfortunately, we don't know much about Jesus' first twelve years, his "hidden years" as scholars call them, we know only that Jesus "grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him." That's it. Luke gives us one more story of Jesus' childhood -- his visit to the temple and his precocious performance before the teachers there. But this event is not so much a part of Jesus' childhood as a signal to his parents and himself that his childhood was over. At age twelve he was on the threshold of a culturally recognized adulthood -- ready to move beyond the simple pleasures of a child.

How ironic that the early church chose to expunge nearly all records of Jesus' childhood when Jesus himself so often used childhood as one of the basic images of our correct relationship with God. Jesus entered this world as a literal child of God, so that each one of us could also become children of a divine Parent. Through our Baptisms we are welcomed into the body of Christ, and we become children of a Heavenly Father. Again and again, Jesus urged his listeners to take on the identity of a child in order to become fully a part of the family of God.

Because we are not born literal sons and daughters of God, we can only join this family of faith through adoption. And anyone who has ever adopted a child into his or her family knows that it is a procedure that involves an inordinate amount of time, is considerably costly, and demands a single-minded intentionality on the part of the adoptive parents. Adoptions don't just "happen." They take hard work, emotional risk, and lots of love and determination.

Perhaps now might be good time for us to reflect briefly on the actions of Jesus' parents in our story this morning, when they designate him to the Lord. Their actions at the temple that day, demonstrated that they were "giving" their child to God. In other words, Jesus no longer simply belonged to them, but he now belonged to God.

In some ways this is similar to our practice of baptizing infants. Parents bring their child to the font and once the water hits their child's forehead, and the Words of God are spoken he or she is now considered a child of God. There can be great comfort in knowing that we have been presented and accepted by God. The world in which we adults live in is not always kind or easy, but we can find reassurance when we remember that we belong to God, that we have been graced by God in baptism.

After all, one might argue that it was risky for God to take on human form in the incarnation of Christ, and that our Lord invested quite a bit in the life of Jesus, not to mention the fact that his son paid the price of a costly ransom through his suffering and death, in order to give us three free gifts -- justification, sanctification, and glorification. And all we have to do to enjoy the gifts of this parentage, to become heirs to life eternal, if you will, is to become like little children ourselves and receive adoption. As author and scholar Philip Schroeder translates Jesus' words about not entering the kingdom of heaven without becoming like a child: "Verily, verily I say unto you, there will be no grownups in heaven."

Adoption is a remarkable act of love. But it is a procedure limited only to children. Once an individual reaches the age of majority or accountability, they no longer "need" to

be adopted - - legally at least. An adult can designate any other adult as an "heir," but they can never really be a true daughter or son.

And yet, when we think of ourselves as children of God, we ought to get literal, and mean it more literally than we take it. Consider all that Jesus might have included in his insistence that we become like a little child. In other words, a Christian should embody certain characteristics of children throughout the years of his or her life.

What got you out of bed bright and early on Christmas morning -- besides the need to stuff a turkey, let the dog out, turn on the tree lights and make coffee? Let me guess: Was it the joy and wonder and anticipation of something yet unknown? To a child every day is new and fresh -- a day filled with possibilities.

Ever notice how children love surprises? Yet, they also love ritual and repetition. At Christmastime these two loves of childhood come together perfectly. The pile of neatly wrapped packages under the tree are surprises just waiting to be discovered. And isn't there usually one special something that we don't even wrap -- that bicycle, or longed-for doll, or snazzy new drum set? Don't we sneak that unwrapped "special something" down on Christmas Eve to pose it under the tree as the "biggest surprise" of them all?

But besides the anticipation of everything new and unexpected, Christmas is steeped in traditions and rituals. Just try to set the nativity scene up somewhere different in your house one year and listen to the howls of protest. And if you are a parent of young children, you've probably read "How the Grinch Stole Christmas" or *The Night before Christmas* about 400 times since Thanksgiving. For little ones, the stories never get old, only dog-eared and crumpled from loving attention.

Getting back to our Gospel story for a second, I think that like Mary, Joseph, Simeon, and Anna, we need to regularly adhere to religious rituals to help us see clearly the ways in which God is there with us. This is a challenge for us modern Christians. It is often difficult for us to find effective traditions for celebrating the presence of God in the ordinary. And yet it is imperative that we take the time each and every day to do this. We need to learn to greet the morning with gratitude; to celebrate the blessings of food, family,

and friendship at meals; to recognize mystery in beauty. In some sense I think children are much better at doing this than adults. Perhaps we need to be continually reminded that certain rituals help us celebrate the goodness and mystery of life, perhaps we need to learn to embrace our inner child.

On December 25 we don't find it all that difficult to be like a little kid -- to take on a child's-eye view of life. But today is December 31st. Have you lost that Christmas sheen already? If the only surprise you can envision in your future is your credit card bill, if the only ritual you want to re-enact is putting the kids back on the bus after Christmas break is over, you need to reclaim your childhood, your child-sense.

So, let the child within you out. "It's never too late to have a happy childhood." Offer yourself up for adoption once again. Dedicate your lives to God once again, for as Paul writes in our second Lesson this morning, "You are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God." Thanks be to God for that and may God bless us all in the new Year! Amen.