

“What Child Is This?”
A Meditation by J. H. Reed
WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
NACOGDOCHES, TEXAS
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“What child is this, who, laid to rest, on Mary’s lap is sleeping?”
He is the prince of peace.

The words to another hymn in our hymnal (not sung tonight) are the instructions to the angels in heaven on the night of Jesus’ birth, before they appeared:

Before the marvel of this night,
adoring, fold your wings and bow;
then tear the sky apart with light
and with your news the world endow.
Proclaim the birth of Christ and peace,
that fear and death and sorrow cease:
sing peace; sing peace; sing gift of peace;
sing peace; sing gift of peace!
----- Jaroslav Vajda (Glory to God #125)

Jesus is the prince of peace. Once in a children’s sermon I asked if Jesus ever cried, and the children said he didn’t. That’s the power of advertising, for the gospel narratives do not say “no crying he makes,” although that’s what we sing in “Away in a Manger.” And it shows how our ideas about Jesus come from somewhere, but not always from scripture.

The church in the first few centuries was deeply divided with heresies and schisms. Hostilities were tremendous. More tremendous than American politics today—so keep your shirt on. The most

powerful and divisive heresy was Gnosticism. You may know that a number of so-called gospels, short life stories about Jesus, were written by the Gnostics. Some describe his childhood. People who feel any regret that we know nothing about the childhood of Christ would probably feel much better about the whole thing if they read about the ridiculous magic that the child Jesus performed according to the ancient charlatans. Yes, I know, it begs the question about other miracles. Not tonight.

Tonight we rest confidently in the mystery and wonder of God's gift of a savior who was born in the same way all of us were born. Mary's question, "How can this be?" is our question. But not tonight. Tonight, listen for angels. None sang at our birth. Any shepherd's come to visit your mother? Astrologer-philosopher kings drop by with gifts from far lands? No?

This child whose praises we limb tonight is promise fulfilled, God's promise. God promised to send the people one who would save them from the suffering their sins produced, and also from death. *This child*, himself vulnerable to human threat and every emotion, temptation, and selfish ambition that fallen human sinful behaviors would heap on him, withstood the aggression that damns humanity and he grew in wisdom and stature and favour with God and humankind.

This child is a king, yet so very unlike any other. I am not a so-called royal watcher, but when I am in line at Kroger or elsewhere, I see the tabloids the same as you do. The tabloids didn't miss stories on the birth of the future English king, sweet little Prince George. Well, believe it or not, some of us remember when his father Prince William was born. Fewer remember when his grandfather, the Prince of Wales was born. During my first week in Nacogdoches someone told me we have 4 members who remember the birth of King Henry the VIII. It is good that OUR king's kingdom was not the golden and yet shabby, temporal and temporary kingdom of this world.

What child is this?

This child is God with us. When we sing Silent Night in a little while the image that will fill me will be the mystery of the God of the universe stooping to our weakness and taking upon himself our life so that we might be saved. The name itself, Jesus, means Savior in the original language he spoke as a child—Aramaic. “Joshua” was what Mary called her child. And actually, many other children had the same name.

Jesus was God in the flesh. Now he is seated at the right hand of the Father in heaven, but in his great love for all the world he still calls his followers to him and feeds us with himself. This, too, is mystery, that we who feed upon him and have fellowship with him are bidden to live together in faith through the church to whom he gave the keys to his kingdom. He is our sovereign Lord and ruler but he gives us the authority signified by keys to his kingdom, and whatever we bind on earth he said is bound in heaven, and whatever we free on earth is freed in heaven. It is through his body the church that we serve him, the gathering of all those who receive life from him, live in him, know him. The present church seeks to use many forms of communication to serve the Lord Jesus but as one blogger, whose livelihood is linked inseparably to digital media, wrote:

You will not find church in Facebook updates or witty tweets or biting essays or debates. Church is something else. Church is what happens when folks meet and sing together (and that will happen again!). Church happens when folks who think differently from each other have no computer to hide behind and are forced to shake hands. Church happens when folks stand shoulder to shoulder and ask God for help. Church is people sweating and serving together. Church is community. Church is not ISSUES and it's not beliefs and it's nothing that needs to be defended since God hardly needs defending. (And Reed would add “never needs defending.”) Church is a group of

folks working their stuff out together, gently. There is no shortcut to church. It's slow, and it's real life, and you have to show up for it.
(--Momastery)

Who is *this child* we worship tonight? He is our light and our salvation, God with us, for us, saving us, and in his brief life and eternal words, calling us to live as he lived:

for others,
for God,
in peace and love.

“Do not be afraid, for I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a savior, who is the Messiah, the Christ, the Lord.” Amen.