

Pastor T.C. Arnold
Christmas Eve
1 John 3:5
Dec. 24th, 2011

In the year 1919 a newspaper printed in Canada called the *Christian Guardian* made known to all its subscribers that they were conducting a competition of who could write the best Christmas carol. A pastor by the name of Joseph Simpson Cook submitted a carol in the hopes it might make an impression. The carol he wrote was **Gentle Mary Laid Her Child**. As you might expect, it took first prize – and now has become one of the most well-known Christmas hymns of all time. He wrote something new about an old story that made an impression.

We already sang this hymn this evening. It's found on page five of your worship bulletin. The words that begin the hymn describe our Savior and His relationship to the world. It says, "**Gentle Mary laid her child Lowly in a manger. There He lay, the Undefined, To the world a stranger.**" Yes, this is the Savior born this day...laid in a manger...undefined... but *to the world a stranger*? Could that part be right?

I would imagine that if you ask anyone you know they would probably be able to tell you that Christmas is the celebration of Jesus' birth. That might not be the case for everyone, but at least could say that a vast majority know it. They know of the celebration that takes place... but how many *KNOW* it. They know *of* Jesus... but how many *KNOW* Jesus? Perhaps this is where we meet the words from Joseph Cook, "To the world a stranger."

The world knows of Jesus. The world does not know Him – personally. You see, to know someone personally is to know things about that person. When you see that person, you can call his name. When you see him, he calls your name. You know what his voice sounds like, what he looks like, what he is like, what he has said and what he is all about. In other words, a person you know personally, is not an acquaintance – or – a stranger.

In 1 John chapter three verse five it says, "*But you know that He appeared so that He might take away our sins. And in Him is no sin.*" It might seem strange to hear a Christmas message from 1 John of all places – not a book of the Bible we read from very often. However, there is no better lense with which to see the Christmas story than from words that lead us to know why Christmas is so important in the first place. "*He appeared so that He might take away your sins.*" That's it!! He appeared... so that. The "so that" part is the news we have been waiting for. The "so that" part is the reason for the season. The gift of faith brings that "so that" part to a people who before knew Him not but are strangers no more.

Yet there are still so many strangers to the Lord's appearing. You know, the people who know *of* Him but don't know Him. Those who know *of* Jesus will celebrate Christmas hearing about Jesus, but not worshipping the newborn King. Those who know *of* Jesus will be sucked into the commercialism of the season and the most important part of the holiday will be the party and the presents. Those who know *of* Jesus will attempt to find fulfillment in being a better person, giving a little extra to the Salvation Army, and maybe buying that one Christmas gift that will for sure be the best gift ever given.

Those who are not strangers to the Lord's appearing know Jesus and not just know *of* Him. Those who know Jesus will be at bended knee before the manger. Those who know Him will not make light of the party and the presents but will see those things as icing on the cake that God has already provided in the newborn King. Those who know Jesus will be filled and fulfilled in the person of Jesus, not the buying of presents.

Jesus appeared... “Lowly in a manger... there He lay, the undefiled.” Jesus appeared... so that... He might take away your sins. Think about it. A lowly child is the King to come. A lowly child so undefiled, worshiped by herdsmen nearby who were called to His presence by an angel saying to them, “*I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord.*” The angel said such words so that the shepherds might know this Jesus, King of glory. They would know who this child was and from where He came. They would know Him as Christ the Lord, sent for a Kingly purpose. They would know the announcement of the angel to be good news because an angel of the Lord told them so. A lowly King to come... and they would know by virtue of an angelic announcement.

And so do you... and I pray the same for your neighbor who does not celebrate this glorious day as the day of the Lord – a day for you from the Lord. “*But you know that He appeared so that He might take away our sins,*” as it says in 1 John 3. You know why He appeared. You know how He appeared. “**Gentle Mary laid her child Lowly in a manger; He is still the Undefiled, But no more a stranger.**”

Since the shouting of the angels to the shepherds... since the bringing of the boy at eight days old to the temple... since the coming of the Magi... **He is still the Undefiled, But no more a stranger. Son of God of humble birth, Beautiful the story; Praise His name in all the earth; Hail the King of glory!**

This Christmas carol, written nearly one hundred years ago tells the beautiful story. A King who came 2000 years ago became the perfect story. Yet again this year we will have a chance to write our Christmas story. Who will it include? I know for this year at least, it includes Jesus this wonderful Christmas evening. And while none of us may ever write a carol like *Gentle Mary Laid Her Child* that wins a publicized contest, our old and familiar Christmas carols will ring out... as we write our own Christmas stories... with Jesus as the reason for our time together. Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding shall keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.