

First Sunday after Christmas
Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Houston, TX

31 December 2023

Welcome to the last day of this 2023! This has been a mixed year for the world, but I don't want to make this sermon a downer. I already preached on Christmas eve about how hard this year has been and you can always go back and give that sermon a listen. Today, I want to celebrate you, the loyal and faithful ones. Let me tell you why. The Sunday after Easter and the Sunday after Christmas have been called in the Church "Low Sundays" because the attendance has been historically poor. It would appear that as a Church we also suffer from post-partum blues. After all the energy spent preparing for Christmas and the birth of Christ, the countless hours shopping, the house cleaning, the parties, the tree decorating, the airport runs to pick up or drop off family members, and all the cooking, there is almost a sense of letdown, and perhaps deep exhaustion the week following Christmas. So, thank you all for being here. It means a lot to me!

I find myself every year around this time reflecting on the fact that we don't know much about the life of Jesus until he is 30 years old, with the exception of the brief episode when he was 12 years old. We simply don't know much about this Jesus of Nazareth. In fact, every culture seems to picture Jesus in a way that best suits that particular culture. For many of us, Middle Class, White, Protestants in the United States, our image of Jesus is most likely the famous painting by Warner Sallman, Entitled "The Head of Christ" (Picture). This 1940 painting has been copied over 500 million times since it was painted. For most Americans this is what Jesus looks like. For most Latin Americans this is what Jesus looks like, which comes in many forms: Spiritual, churchy, Methodist, punk rocker, and my favorite, Gang-member style (Please see the last pages of this sermon for pictures.)

The truth is that we don't really know what Jesus looks like. We don't know if he went to school or not. We don't know if he was popular and friendly, or if he chose to spend most of his time reading the Jewish Scriptures and helping his dad at the shop. We infer from scripture that he was a carpenter, but not once did Jesus refer to himself as a carpenter. We simply don't know much about Jesus until he begins his early ministry at the age of 30. This lack of knowing concerned many people in the early centuries of the Church. By the fourth century, there were a variety of infancy stories about Jesus that circulated openly throughout the known world. There is a particular narrative called, "the Infancy Gospel of Matthew," also known as Pseudo-Matthew where the animals around the stable at the time of Jesus' birth speak openly about Jesus to other animals. In the Infancy Gospel of Thomas (c.140–170) Jesus makes clay birds and then sets them to flight, he curses a bully in a playground who dies instantly, but then the boy Jesus feels compassion for the bully and raises him back up from the dead (See, *Christ the Lord*, by Anne Rice, 2005.) In other accounts, Jesus's diaper heals people, his sweat cures leprosy.

He planted a church in England in his mother's honor when he and Joseph of Arimathea sailed to these isles at the age of 12. In other accounts he studied in India, Persia, or Tibet between the ages of 12 and 30 years of age.

I am glad that the early church rejected these stories and chose to follow the leads of the canonical Gospels when it came to the infancy narratives of Jesus. They were willing to acknowledge that Jesus spent 90% of his life in obscurity, in absolute quietness when it came to the world, in seclusion. I find this extremely counter-revolutionary and attractive. Jesus did not write any books, did not seek notoriety, did not do great signs and wonders, did not draw any attention to himself, but rather prepared himself in quietness and confidence for the coming of his mission to the world. He simply lived his life in anonymity until his time came. This is counter-revolutionary for an age where we seek to be known, to be recognized, to be remembered, and to be famous from an early age.

What is absolutely reassuring is that even though Jesus' early life was a mystery to the world, it was not a mystery to God. Christ was with God and in the presence of God since the beginning of creation, as John tells us today. He was the creative power of God through whom everything was made. Likewise, God was with the boy Jesus as he grew up, as he engaged in his everyday life, as he was a son and a brother and a friend. God was with the boy Jesus in the good times and in the bad times, when the world made sense and when the world appeared confusing and cruel, when he lived a quiet existence and when he stepped out into the world stage, when in the eyes of the world he was a nobody and when he was hailed by crowds and adored by thousands.

And I say that this is absolutely reassuring because most of us lead a quiet existence. We are not famous or particularly memorable. Most of us are the type of people the world will forget sooner or later. The irony of this communications age is that we are no more memorable today than most people were during Jesus' time. We are here today and gone tomorrow, and with the exception of few people, nobody will even miss us. But the Good news is that God sees us, that God knows us, that our lives are not a mystery to God, in the same way that Jesus' first 30 years of life were not a mystery to God. Even though Christ is the Word who was with God and who was God, through his incarnation and through the miracle of his resurrection he chose to become one of us and to remain with us forever in human form.

He walks with us as we lead our quiet lives, as we engage in the everyday struggles of our existence, as we look for meaning and for purpose in our jobs, our relationships, our affiliations, and our hobbies. He is with us as we worry about our children, as fuss to our husbands and wives, as we grieve the loss of family and friends, and as we struggle with financial matters or health issues. He is with us as we deal with pain and regret, as we confront our inability to forgive, and as we try to recover from our addictions. He is with us today, he sees us, and he loves us in spite of who we are, or precisely because of who we are.

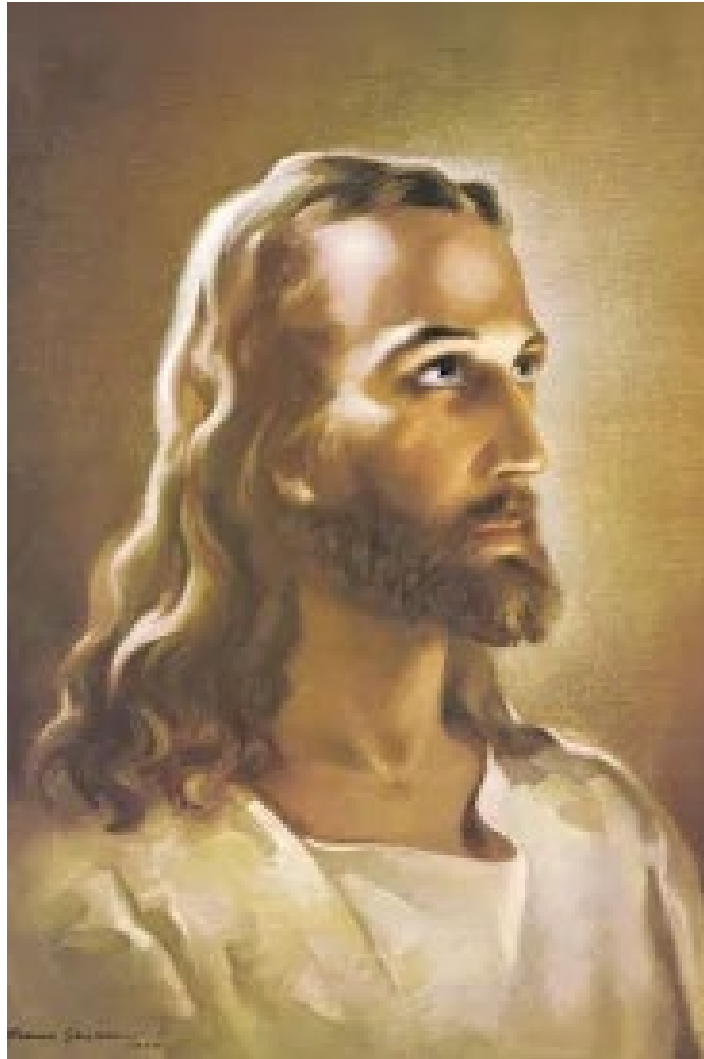
Today, when we are feeling that sense of letdown after the highs of Christmas, and as we are feeling exhausted, let us remind ourselves that Emmanuel is among us in the routine of our everyday lives, even on this the last day of the year. He is with us and will never leave us. Let us create a space in our hearts for Emmanuel and let us rejoice in the fact that God is with us and that we will never be alone in this world as long as we are willing to acknowledge his presence among us. He is here, he is with us, and he will guide us to the end. The scene of Christmas is not only a past event, but also a present and future reality. Our Lord has come, he is here with us, and he will come again. Our faith is rooted in this belief. And this is the source of our hope and joy. Let us pray,

Dear God,

Thank you for the gift of your son, our Savior. Help us to create a space in our hearts for him to dwell, and help us to acknowledge his presence in our lives every day. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen!

Pictures of Jesus below

Warner Sallman, "The Head of Christ". This 1940 painting has been copied over 500 million times since it was painted. Many Americans believe this is what Jesus really looked like.



This is what most Latin Americans believe Jesus looks like, which comes in a variety of styles and sensibilities, but if it doesn't have the heart, it isn't Jesus!



This is the version
In most churches



A more spiritual version found
as a small laminated card in most
Latin American Bibles



Methodist Sacred
Heart (my nickname
because of the short hair)



Punk Rocker Sacred Heart
(My nickname because of the
Long hair and dramatic
black and red colors)



Gang Member Sacred Heart
(My nickname because of the
gang signs on both hands)