



# Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina  
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DECEMBER 24, 2018  
CHRISTMAS EVE

Longing . . . To Believe  
Isaiah 9:2-7; Titus 2:11-14; Luke 2:1-20

We are all familiar with the editorial that was written in *The Sun* newspaper on September 21, 1897 in response to a letter from eight-year-old Virginia O'Hanlon. Francis Pharcellus Church, who had written for the paper for years, was given the task of answering a child's request about whether or not Santa Claus is real. The result was the most popular and re-printed editorial ever, known near and far as, "Yes, Virginia, there is a Santa Claus." With care and directness, Mr. Church answered Virginia's question, a question which we all ask at some point or another.

I admire this brilliant piece of writing which speaks truth to honest inquiry and offers real faith to jaded minds. Even more, I love Virginia's letter for its simple honesty and intense desire. She wrote,

DEAR EDITOR: I am 8 years old.  
Some of my little friends say there is no Santa Claus.  
Papa says, 'If you see it in THE SUN it's so.'  
Please tell me the truth; is there a Santa Claus?<sup>1</sup>

The intensity in her plea is real. This little girl is desperate to know who is right, she or her friends. Is there a Santa Claus or is there not? She wants to know the truth, but you can tell that she longs to believe that Santa is real. There are a lot of children wrestling with sleep tonight, both young and old, who also long to believe Santa is real.

I also think that there are plenty of us, young and older, who are longing to believe that what we celebrate this night is real as well. There is a lot of tradition and wonder and mystery woven into and around the birth of Jesus. At some point, we might each of us be tempted say to someone, "Please tell me the truth. Is there a God? Is Christmas real?"

I don't mean to suggest that any of us are heretics or unbelievers. I know that sitting in this beautiful sanctuary, lit by warm light, infused with

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<sup>1</sup>Newseum, "Yes, Virginia, There is a Santa Claus," *The Sun* (September 21, 1897); available online at: <http://www.newseum.org/exhibits/online/yes-virginia/>.

beautiful music, and embellished with hundreds of years of tradition, it is not difficult to believe in the birth of Jesus Christ. But what about the day after tomorrow or next year. When we are standing alone, face to face with the sometimes harsh realities of life, will we believe? Can we believe? We long to believe. We want to believe, but do we believe?

I grant you that there are aspects to the story that are difficult for a twenty-first century mind to grasp. There are things that we do not experience now, at least I don't. I have never heard an angel choir sing, although I think our choir gets about as close as you can. I have never been visited by beings from another dimension of life. I have, however, been visited by emissaries of God— people like you who ask me questions, who tell me truth, who guide me in a better way to go, who have found the truth and bear witness to its liberating freedom. I may not refer to you as angels, but messengers of God are all around me day by day and have been all of my life.

While some people may try to claim it, I am not aware of any modern day instances of a virgin birth. Yet, I do know people who have been visited by the Spirit of God, who have been impregnated with gifts of all kinds that have given birth to kindness, generosity, and selflessness. I have seen the birth of creativity in the form of art and music, poetry and prose, architecture and horticulture, leadership and support. I have seen God bring new life out of people who otherwise seemed barren in so many ways. God creates life in surprising and unusual circumstances each and every day.

I do not put a lot of stock in astrology. I do believe God created the stars and planets and everything else rolling around in this wonderful home we call the universe, but I do not necessarily look to the night sky to determine what my next moves will be. Yet, I respect people who pay close attention to the world, who notice trends and shifts and changes. If we listen to them, they can tell us a lot about our world, good and bad, and help us to find the right paths to take care of the world and one another. If Jesus came as the Light of the World and magi from the East followed natural signs to find him, would it not be reasonable for God to speak through learned minds to lead us to light and truth today?

I have to pay attention to the fact that “the first noel,” the first glad shouts of Christmas joy, were offered to shepherds who were out in the fields taking care of their sheep, the very image Jesus would later choose to illustrate his relationship with us. I do know hardworking, honest people who are often overlooked and who frequently end up with the short end of any

stick they are holding. If God wanted the poor and humble people of Israel to be the first to know the good news that Messiah had come, shouldn't I pay attention to the people in our community and world who fit that same description? And if they are so special as to be high on God's list, shouldn't they be high on mine as well?

There are plenty of amazing, mysterious, unbelievable things that took place in and around the birth of Jesus. Do those same things happen today? You tell me. I do know that when things finally settled down, Mary pondered it all. She took it all in, turned it over this way and that, and allowed it to settle deep in her soul. She believed.

Perhaps if we would take the time to honestly reflect on the story of Jesus' birth and pay close attention to the story of our own life, we might discover a lot of similarities. We might discover that God is still being born in our world—in us—day by day—even tonight! Our longing to believe is the birth of our faith, but it is only the beginning, like the birth of a child. Our longing to believe continues to unfold just as the life of Jesus did and does. It grows and matures and changes and surprises, but it is real.

Yes, there is a God and Christmas is real, and Jesus was born as a child millennia ago. He is also born anew in our hearts tonight and every night . . . if we long to believe.

December 24, 2018

Prayer of Thanksgiving

Gracious God, with joy and thanksgiving we gather as your people to experience again the wondrous Good News of Christ's birth. In the excitement of this night, quiet our hearts that we may know the peace and fullness of these holy moments. Close every door of hate and open to us pathways of love for all your children. Transform our hearts and minds to reflect the image of the child whose birth changes us and changes the world. May we offer kindness with every gift and grace with every greeting. Fill us with gratitude for the blessings which flow from your generous hand with such extravagance that we cannot help but respond to the needs of others with mercy and compassion.

Shine, O Light, in the darkness of our world!

Sing, O angels, in the joy of all heaven and nature!

Come, O Holy Child of Bethlehem, in the stillness of our hearts, for our hearts are ready to worship and adore you,  
the Word who became flesh and dwelt among us. Amen.

Elizabeth J. Edwards  
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