

Rev. Josh Stephens
St. John in the Wilderness
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Christmas Day:
We are not stepchildren to God

One of the great struggles we have as American Christians is to wade through our personal and societal materialism on our way to God. In other words – to put it bluntly – all of our stuff gets in the way. And Christmas, rather than being the exception to that, has become the ultimate expression of American consumerism and materialism. *In fact, I always remind my kids when they ask about Christmas that it's really about getting stuff but they keep correcting me to say that it's not about the stuff: it's when we celebrate Jesus birthday, they say.*

Last year, a voice in the wilderness of the Holy Land's wars reminded us of this. Bishop Housam, the Episcopal Bishop of Israel, Palestine, Syria, and beyond, spoke about how Advent was marked by the lighting of candles which can mean peace, hope, love, and joy. As the bombs dropped and the devastation continued and still continues now, the Bishop said it was not hard in their circumstances to relate to the reality of that first Christmas.

He said, in terms of receiving gifts at Christmas, that we have been given the greatest gift of all: Jesus, the Prince of Peace. So observe Christmas, Bishop Housam said, without the commercialization. Observe Christmas like the first time. When we look back at the first Christmas, there seemed to be nothing joyful about it. There was no room at the inn. Holy and innocent children were being sought out and massacred. What's joyful about riding a donkey at eight or nine months pregnant? What's joyful about a manger? What's joyful about a shepherd's night shift?

It was just the baby being born. It was just God coming to us. It was and is Christ Jesus being born that brought joy into a joyless night so long ago. Him being with us is what gives us true joy and hope this day and evermore.

God snuck a baby into the backdoor of Creation to be adopted by us so that we might be adopted by God. We are made children of God by adoption and grace, our collect says. We have become full heirs in his Kingdom.

Think for a moment of all of the times in your life when you longed to be a part of something – when you joined a team or an organization only to realize that you weren't quite good enough to make it. Or they wanted you "in theory" but in "in reality." Think for a moment of all of those stories you've heard over the years of people being a part of a family, *but not really*. Like Cinderella, for example. She's the *stepdaughter*. She's part of the family, *but not really*. Or even

like Prince Harry, Duke of Sussex, whose memoir is illustratively entitled *Spare*. He's a part of the family, but not really, he says.

In contrast, we have Jesus Christ – God being born of a human mother. We have God taking the first step – a step so entirely towards us and for us that it has rippled out in grace ever since. God longs for you so much that God takes on your humanity that you might take on something of God's divinity. God enters our poverty that through him we might experience the richness of God's grace.

You are not stepchildren to God in some cosmic fairytale. You are not children that God could spare. You have Christ Jesus as your true brother. You have been born again by water and the Holy Spirit and made into beloved children of God by adoption and grace – full heirs in him.

And all together, as the prophet Isaiah says, we make a “Holy people, The Redeemed of the Lord.” We are “Sought Out,” Isaiah says. We are, as Christ's Church, “A City Not Forsaken.” (Isaiah 62:12).

So rejoice, my friends. Receive the true joy of Christ himself born into a joyless night until God entered in for us. Rejoice in Christ's birth this Christmas – God with us, God enfleshed – and rejoice in being claimed, chosen, adopted, and redeemed. You are nothing more and nothing less than God's beloved children. Amen.