

Around this time of year, a friend of mine would often say, “Christmas is for children.”

He was right, of course. The sights, the sounds, the anticipation of a mountain of presents beneath the tree; all of it is designed to delight children. Many of us have childhood memories of Christmas that we treasure.

There is one Christmas that I vividly recall—I was either in Kindergarten or first grade, and was a huge Star Wars fan. We had finished unwrapping the presents, and I was very happy with what I received, but then, to my surprise, my dad went in the other room and brought out one more present, a pretty big box. I tore off the paper and there before me was a Star Wars Death Star Play Set, complete with rotating cannon and trash compactor. Delighted doesn’t begin to describe it. And before you ask, yes, I still have it.

However, that’s not all that my friend meant when he said “Christmas is for children.” There is a little darker side to that statement. What he was implying was that Christmas was for children, but not adults, not really. He was thinking of all the grownups for whom Christmas is a painful reminder of what they have lost. The traditions and the trappings have lost much of their meaning. This current Christmas pales in comparison to the golden glow of childhood memory. Or maybe it’s just that the innocence of childhood has been replaced with cynicism, because, you know, that’s what it means to be ‘sophisticated.’

So was my friend right? Is Christmas for children only? I guess it all depends how you define Christmas. One thing’s for sure: the Christmas that is celebrated in the Church is because of a Child. Just a few minutes ago, you heard the memories that Mary treasured; the memories of the birth of her baby boy. Like most childbirth stories, this one is wild and messy and beautiful. What sets this childbirth story apart from all others is that this baby is also God. He is God With Us, born to give you a life you could never have on your own. If Christmas is nothing more than feasting and fairy tales, parties and presents, then yes, it’s probably mostly for children. But if Christmas can be a time for you to concentrate on this Child, then you will see that it is for everyone. And it’s not enough to say that this Child will fill your activities with meaning. This Christmas Child can give you something that can’t be lost. He can show you a love that goes beyond sentimentality. He can replace your cynicism with a second innocence that is not limited to once a year. Don’t you want that?

Then tonight, let’s approach the manger bed of Jesus, to learn from the Child and to learn as a child.

First—we approach the newborn Jesus to learn from the Child. Now, right away, you may wonder what you could possibly learn from an infant. Adults teach children, not the other way around. But hold on. This is a special case. To

your eyes and mine, this is just a little Galilean boy all swaddled up in a makeshift crib. But this is the child about whom the angel Gabriel had said: "He will be very great and will be called the Son of the Most High." The angels who announced his birth to the shepherds called him "The Savior, the Messiah, the Lord." The Bible also says this child "did not think of equality with God as something to cling to. Instead he gave up his divine privileges; he took the humble position of a servant; and was born as a human being" (Phil. 2: 6-7).

Do you see? In this baby Jesus, God makes himself vulnerable. He sets aside his right to rule heaven to come down here to earth. He becomes completely dependent on mother and father to feed and protect him. Baby Jesus is "God At Risk." If things go wrong, he could die.

The shock of Christmas is that this is by design. The time will come, decades in the future, when Jesus will make the ultimate sacrifice to bring forgiveness to all people. But really, that sacrifice begins here, as Jesus is born in the cold darkness of a stable. He enters our darkness to exchange it with his warmth and light.

Looking down at the baby in the manger, you learn that to love is to be vulnerable. To love means to sacrifice all if necessary. This little one will do exactly that for you. This we learn from the Christ Child. Tonight, you can learn from a child, and learn as a child.

What does that look like? It looks like the experience of a six-year-old girl named Ava. Ava's home life was a mess. Her father spent little time at home, and when he was there, he and Ava's mother fought. Sometimes they made up, sometimes he stormed out. Ava would run and hide in her bedroom for hours. Whole days sometimes.

At some point, Ava had been invited to Sunday School with a friend, and she really liked it—especially practice for the Christmas program. She gladly took the role of a sheep, because it meant no speaking part. But she was in the play.

One Saturday, when practice was over and the children were getting picked up, the teachers experienced a collective moment of panic, when they realized Ava wasn't there. She had just been with the group in rehearsal, hitting her spot as a sheep. Her teacher did a quick sweep through the classrooms and then went into the sanctuary, which had a large nativity scene up near the altar. That is when she stopped in her tracks. There was Ava. She had stuck around in the church, and had gone up and taken the Baby Jesus figure right out of the manger, and had sat down and was holding him close, and was singing lullabies to him, *Jesus Loves Me* and *Away in a Manger*.

Sit down next to Ava and cradle this baby in your heart. Not because he's cute; not because you feel sorry for him being born in a stable; but because he is a hero. He's your hero. He's made himself completely vulnerable in order to get next to you. He's come down here to do battle with evil and death. He's opening the way to abundant life with God. All for you. You don't have to put him back in

the manger. Not tonight, and not ever. Hold him close.

Let's pray: *Be near me, Lord Jesus; I ask Thee to stay close by me forever and love me, I pray. Bless all the dear children in Thy tender care, and take us to heaven to live with Thee there. Amen.*