When I was a little girl, and had learned to read, I became even more fascinated by the gifts under the Christmas tree—well, at least those with my name on the tag.  I would move the package under a lamp and try to press the paper flat against the box to see if I could read any words: Baseball mitt, a game of Monopoly, or maybe something I hadn’t even asked for.

But even if I could read the words, it just increased my desire to get under the paper, inside the box.  Because, though the words themselves were fun to read, they were really just teasers to whatever was inside.  They made me want to hold and touch and play with the actual thing the words described.  The words were not enough.

          The Word was made flesh.

In John’s gospel, the Word was with God from the beginning, but it wasn’t enough.  It was the actual thing, the real person, who was needed. Jesus was still needed. The miracle of a human child, who is unable even to use words until he or she learns to speak, makes their realness and their physicality the means to connection.  That the eternal Word could be present in a human was beyond imagination.  Yet, there it was. Jesus was born with human flesh.

What does it mean for us, when we are unable to touch the infant Jesus, smell his baby breath, see his fingers and toes, or hear his cries? Let me read a portion of John 1 from Eugene Peterson’s paraphrase translation,

He was in the world, the world was there through him, and yet the world didn’t even notice. He came to his people, but they didn’t want him. But whoever did want him, who believed he was who he claimed and would do what he said, He made to be their true selves, their child-of-God selves.

First, notice that John’s “Christmas story” dallies not with angels or shepherds and seems to know nothing of a young mother or magi. Indeed, John’s story is hardly about the birth of Jesus at all but instead focuses on the difference that birth makes for all of us. Let me explain.

There are, on the whole, just two crucial lines that deal with Jesus’ birth and what we often call the Incarnation. John 1:1 is the first: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the word was God.” The second comes at verse 14: “And the Word” — that was with God and is God — “became flesh and dwelt among us.” There it is: John’s Christmas story, the story of God becoming human, taking on our lot and our life that we might live and love and struggle and die with hope.

But that’s not all John offers, which brings me to the second thing that invites our consideration. Because, as I mentioned before, while John sums up the Christmas story in just two lines, he spends more time on the significance of Christmas by shifting attention from Jesus’ birth to ours. In fact, John is actually less interested in the birth of a babe at Bethlehem than he is in the birth of you and I as children of God.

Did you catch that? Jesus came that we might become children of God. Children that is, who are not dominated by the circumstances in which we find ourselves, not defined by our limitations or hurts, and whose destinies are not controlled by others. Rather, we are those individuals who know ourselves to be God’s own beloved children.

To fully appreciate the significance of what John is saying, I think we need to distinguish briefly between those things that describe us and those that define us. All too often, I believe, we allow certain elements of our life to dominate and define us. Things like our upbringing or interests, our good experiences and our bad ones, our current marital state or our sexuality, our past triumphs or tragedies. Don’t get me wrong, these things matter and are what I would call descriptively true. But all too often we allow them not just to describe parts of our life but to define us completely.

In these verses, John invites us to hold all of the ordinary things that describe us as important but insufficient, as valuable but partial, as meaningful but not definitive. What is definitive — that God has called us God’s own children, individuals who hold infinite worth in God’s eyes, deserve love and respect, and will be used by God to care for God’s beloved world.

Can we imagine that? That Jesus came and was born, lived, died, and was raised again not simply to pay some “penalty for sin” but rather to remind us and even convince us that God loves us more than anything? God calls us good, not just in Genesis, but continues to do so through a man named Jesus.

More than that, can we practice God’s goodness? I want to suggest you practice this one small exercise during the month of January 2022. Once every day — and it will be easier if it’s the same time each day — but that’s up to you; look in the mirror and say the following: “I am God’s child, deserving of love and respect, and God will use me to change the world.”

Sounds simple, doesn’t it? But in my experience, these words are actually rather hard to say and even harder to believe. Which is why we need to do it every day through an entire month. Because the first few times you say it, you’re likely not to believe it; that is, all those descriptive things about you — especially those that are difficult or that you don’t like — will begin to creep in and voice doubts about what you are confessing.

It will sound different for each person, of course, but many of these negative messages will likely run something like this: “You, a child of God? But what about your failed job or marriage? What about when you disappointed your parents or children? And don’t forget about all the missteps and mistakes you’ve made. Yeah, maybe God loves you, but you don’t really deserve that love, and you’re certainly not in a position to change yourself, let alone the world.”

This is why John’s unsentimental Christmas message is so important. Because in the face of all these messages — many of which are rooted in something that is descriptively true (we have made mistakes, and disappointed ourselves and others) — John asserts that what is really trueabout each and everyone of us, is that Jesus gives us the “power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.” And nothing can change that. We are made in the image of God, and we must keep reminding ourselves in whom we belong. It is then that these verses in Chapter 1 of John can make sense to us. We are the beloved of God. Amen.