

# What Child is This : Anthem



I love a good question. I mentioned this earlier during Advent that my

appreciation of good questions comes from a professor of mine from the University of Sioux Falls named Dr. Jenny Bangsund. She was a literature professor I had, and one time in a lecture she said that the most important thing we can do in our life is to learn how to ask good questions. I took this to heart. If you borrow a book from me, you'll notice underlines and circles, highlights and marks. You'll also see questions scrawled in the margins (And I hope that they are *good* questions). Every time I preach, it's my hope to ask a good question about the scripture text that we're focusing on and maybe even a good question about how we live our faith in light of what we've heard from scripture.

And when I get asked a good question, it just puts a smile on my face. After church on Sunday, I got a text from a member asking a really good question about the sermon I'd just preached, and it made me smile for literally a solid half an hour. And as I've said before, William Chatterton-Dix's Christmas poem-turned-hymn, *What Child is This*, asks us a very good question. It's a question of utmost importance not just during the Christmas season, but it's a question for us to ask and seek answers to all the time as we continue to grow in our lives of faith. We've spent the past four weeks seeking an answer, and we have heard a myriad of responses. And tonight, we'll seek one more.



It seems like we have fully explored the nativity and what each person in

the Christmas story has to offer us as we answer this all-important question: what child is this? We looked to the shepherds and realized that the shepherds saw one of their own in the Christ-Child, the one who would call himself the Good Shepherd. The Wisemen saw one who disrupted the cosmological order at his birth and

imparted Godly wisdom on the world. Mary saw her first child, the baby who made her life amazing but more difficult and saw one as committed to God's mission as she was. Joseph, even though he's not mentioned in the song or poem *What Child Is This*, saw One whose love for all God's people would reflect Joseph's love for and relationship toward his son. And even though these answers are varied, they all convey a measure of truth about who this child Jesus is! Jesus, the Christ Child, is all of these things, and obviously so much more.



But there's still one more character to hear from. It hardly seems

possible, but we do. It's not the sheep and oxen, which are mentioned in *What Child is This*, or even the curmudgeonous innkeeper. It's not the angels who sang. No, the character we are looking at is *ourselves*. Even though we weren't there, this story has made an impact on us. And not only the story but the characters, too. No, we didn't see a star and follow it until it came over the place where Jesus lay. We aren't keeping watch over sheep tonight, probably, and it's even less likely that we'll be interrupted by the song of the angels. Angels haven't appeared to us and given us the news of a coming child whose birth was prophesied a few thousand years before. But that doesn't change the fact that one way or another, we have seen Jesus or are longing to see Jesus. Something, sometime, one time, happened, and it left us asking a really good question, "What child is this?"

What child is this that walked beside me while I was at my lowest point and felt like just giving up? What child is this that I experienced comfort in the midst of my grief? What child is this that I stood outside and just looked around and knew the creative and creating work of God? What child is this that I experienced welcome and

love without condition in his presence? What child is this that I can boldly approach the holy presence of God without fear?

What child is this? William Chatterton-Dix answered this way, “This, this is Christ the King, whom shepherds guard and angels sing; haste, haste to bring Him laud, the Babe, the Son of Mary.”



More of the answer is revealed in our scripture reading this evening from

the gospels and Revelation. The answer is that this is Jesus, the one who was born on that holy night long ago and the one who will come in final victory to make all things right, to rule in justice, and to help us live in equity. This is Jesus, one who is the Word of God made flesh. This is the good news of God’s love personified. This is the divine breaking into our timeline and our experience in a way that God hadn’t done since the very start of this human experiment. When God created Adam and Eve, God walked with them in perfect relationship; but after their sin, the relationship changed. God was still there, still living, still loving, but wasn’t walking right beside the creation in the same way. But through Jesus, on this Holy Night so long ago, God broke back into the world in a physical sense, but not how one would expect the God of the Universe. Despite being the king of kings and the very Word of God, Jesus did not come as a king commanding respect or obedience or as a slick and charismatic speaker selling snake oil wrapped up as salvation. No, Jesus, God-in-flesh, came as a baby, vulnerable and lowly. And the salvation he offered and offers is no snake oil but the real thing. As we heard in our video clip, Jesus is the one who saves us. And because Jesus coming the first time was the real thing, we put our hope and faith in the fact that in the midst of the injustice and hurt we see in the world, there’s coming a day when the light of God will shine

brighter, the story will change, and we will see the fullness of God coming in grace and truth to set all things right and be the fullest expression of Emmanuel, God with us.



So the question is still out there for each of us to answer: what child is

this? And the question is bigger than just Jesus as a child. The good question that Dr. Bangsund would appreciate all of us asking ourselves is this, “Who is Jesus to us?” And I can’t answer that for you. I can only scrawl it in the margins of your mind during the hustle and bustle of this holiday season and challenge you to do the hard work of reflection and seeking answer for yourself. And I can give you the best that I’ve come up with so far: For me, this child Jesus is the one who mixed our dirt with God’s divinity and really entered the muck and mire of our human existence so that he could know what we go through. He’s the one who lived his life every day looking to encounter ordinary people like me and you and show God’s love. He’s the one who’s worthy of our praise because of how he lived, how he died, and how he defeated death. And he’s the one who has promised to do it all again so that we can live eternally with him.

It’s a great question that’s worth our consideration: what child is this?