



DIOCESE OF THE ARMENIAN CHURCH OF AMERICA (EASTERN)
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CHRISTMAS MESSAGE OF ARCHBISHOP KHAJAG BARSAMIAN
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Beginning to Be

LIKE A BLAST FROM A TRUMPET, St. Luke begins his telling of the Nativity story with all the impressive pomp of worldly power. We hear of a decree issued to the entire world. We tremble at the authority to command and tax. We are dazzled by the sheer glamour of the Roman emperor's name. *These* are the things, people at the time could rest assured, that History would mark when the important books were written.

But then, in the space of a few words, Luke abruptly shifts the scene from the world stage to a little town on the fringes of empire; from the realm of power politics to the domestic trials of a struggling couple. Stranded far from home, awaiting the imminent delivery of a child, they seem defenseless against the larger forces of the world. Their vulnerability is summed up in a single sentence: *"And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn"* (Luke 2:7).

Up to this point in the story, we haven't even been told the baby's name. Yet *his* is the story we will follow in the pages – and ages – to come. Two thousand years later we are *still* following him. The dazzling worldly powers Luke mentions in those early lines are matters of remote history now; yet today we are consciously preparing – as we do every year – to honor that humble birth in Bethlehem.

What is it about this child that causes us to remember him?

It's worth noting that the world has not always celebrated Christmas. Even in the early church, the Nativity was not immediately celebrated as a feast day. But gradually it dawned on people that the deepest reality – the greatest truth about the world, and its greatest hope – had been revealed in a place and time hidden away from the courts of wealth and power.

It became the purpose of the gospel writers to proclaim this unexpected story to the world. The greater part of the gospel account, of course, relates events from our Lord's adult life: his teachings, his miracles, the drama of his death and resurrection – the purpose which he faithfully served. What the Nativity story emphasizes, however, is that this purpose was not something that evolved or grew out of some personal journey. To the contrary, Christ's purpose was present from the beginning: his very existence – his conception, his birth, his life in its totality – was oriented towards its fulfillment.

Once again, Luke's gospel draws our attention to this point. In its depiction of Christ's baptism in the river Jordan, we read of the skies opening, the Holy Spirit descending as a dove, the Voice booming from heaven: *"Thou art my beloved Son; in thee I am well*

pleased." And then, in one of the most subtle lines in the Bible (Luke 3:23), Luke adds:
"And Jesus himself began to be about thirty years of age..."

"Jesus himself began to be." The meaning, it seems, is that Jesus fulfilled his calling, revealed his true purpose, from this moment in his life. Perhaps this is one reason why the Armenian Church celebrates Christ's birth and baptism in the same feast: his existence and ministry are in the deepest sense one and the same. And surely this is why not only Christ's active deeds as an adult, but also his birth, his entry into the world, became causes for mankind to rejoice.

In this understanding, we see the outlines of the Christian idea of *vocation*. The Armenian term *gochoum*, like the word vocation itself, means "Calling," and its insight is that God creates each person as a unique individual, whose entire life aims at a greater purpose.

Having fulfilled his own blessed purpose, Christ now calls to us. In the broadest sense, he calls each of us to "begin to be" our *true* selves, by fulfilling our role in God's great drama. For some, that role is to take up our Lord's pastoral staff: to serve him, and serve his people, as priests of the church. In the coming year, throughout our Diocese, we will explore and encourage this most precious calling in our "Year of Vocations: The Call to Serve."

But for all human beings, the fact that God calls each of us to a special purpose is itself a wonderful revelation. It means that our very existence, the living out of our callings, is something that rejoices God. Through Christ, we have been affirmed as God's children; we, too, can become those in whom He is well pleased.

May this beautiful Good News inspire us as we celebrate the revelation of Christ. And may we all open our hearts to his call this Christmas, when we joyfully proclaim:

Krisdos dzunav yev haydnetzav! Orhnyal eh haydnootiunun Krisdosee!
Christ is born and revealed! Blessed is the revelation of Christ!

With prayers,



Archbishop Khajag Barsamian
Primate

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