

“Some Children See Him”
A sermon for the First Sunday after Christmas
December 26, 2021

Let us pray: Loving God,

What we know not, please teach us;
What we have not, please provide us;
What we are not, please transform and make us.
We ask in the name of Christ, AMEN.

In 1922, the Reverend Bates Burt was serving at the All Saints Episcopal Church in Pontiac, Michigan and began a practice of writing an original Christmas carol and sending it to his friends. Rev. Burt continued this practice for many years and people looked forward to receiving their annual Christmas carol.

When Rev. Burt’s youngest son, Alfred, graduated from college, he took over the Christmas carol project. Alfred collaborated with a long-time family friend named Wihla Hutson. Alfred and Wihla were both highly trained and very gifted musicians.

One day when Wihla was visiting at the Burt’s home, she was inspired by a conversation she had with Alfred’s wife, Anne, who was expecting her first child. Anne wanted that year’s Christmas carol to be about family and children. During their conversation, Wihla heard Anne say that she saw the infant Jesus in the way a child would see him. When Wihla got into her car to drive home later that day, her mind was crowded with thoughts of children. She began to think that children from different cultures would see the Christ child differently from herself. An African child, Wihla thought, would see Jesus as an African baby, an Oriental child would see the baby Jesus with oriental features, and so on. Wihla would later say that she had never before thought about God as so truly universal.

With all these thoughts racing through her mind, Wihla pulled her car over to the side of the road and wrote the lyrics for a Christmas carol that would become known as “Some Children See Him.”

Alfred set the lyrics to music and the song became an instant hit. If you don’t know this carol, “Some Children See Him”, there’s several versions on You Tube.

The first verse of the song sets the tone for the carol and it begins with these words: Some children see him lily white, the baby Jesus born this night. The next three verses follow the same form. Verse two begins: Some children see him bronzed and brown with dark and heavy hair. Verse three says: some children see him almond-eyed with skin of yellow hue.

There are no definitive descriptions of Jesus in Scripture. And even though Jesus was a famous rabbi in the area in which he lived, on his last night in the Garden of Gethsemane, someone had to point him out specifically to the Roman soldiers so they could arrest the right man.

We have a pretty good idea of the general appearance of the Jews in Roman Palestine, but we don't know much more than that. The most prominent description of Jesus comes from the prophet Isaiah who wrote, "he had no form or majesty that we should look at him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him." (Isa 53:2b)

From the days of the early church, Christians all over the world have projected onto Jesus the characteristics of their own cultures and we can see this in images from Ethiopia to Norway to China.

This Christmas carol takes very seriously a passage of scripture from Mark's gospel where Jesus says, "Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it."

When you consider the marvelous imagination of children, it really doesn't take much to think or say, "Some children do see him lily white," or "bronzed and brown," or "almond-eyed," or "dark as they." And one way of accepting God's kingdom as a child is to look with the openness of a child, where difference is simply not primary, and where the baby Jesus is just like our selves—whoever we are.

The final verse of this carol brings an important truth home. It begins: *O lay aside each earthly thing*; each earthly thing—think what that means; it's not material things that we must lay aside.

In the seventy years or so since this carol was written, the world seems more divided than ever. What was once a difference of opinion or a different outlook on life has become too often a source of anger, hatred, and sometimes violence. In the social media world these days we want to cancel anyone who doesn't think like we do. These divisions and hostilities are some of the earthly things we must lay aside.

This carol also presents us with a challenge. It's this: What do we see when we think of the baby Jesus, what do we see when we look at another person? Not just another person here, but any other person in the world.

How often do we stop and think that the other person is our brother or sister in Christ? Do we stop and consider that the other person carries within them the same image of Christ that

we do? I admit that many times, I am not looking for the image of Christ within others and I do not see Jesus.

Maybe our blindness to the Christ within all of us is another earthly thing we need to lay aside.

Our culture has gotten really good at bestowing labels on people and groups; Sometimes those labels bestow an identity, sometimes those labels are rude or unflattering or obscene. We see and label others in ways that say a lot more about us than about them. And when we see and label others in ways that are rude or unflattering or obscene; what does that say about how we might see Christ?

It is the Christ within us—that image of God--that gives us our true identity. It is the Christ within us that can heal our divisions and bring us peace.

The reality of this world is that we are *all* in the same boat. **ALL OF US.** The God who created us, created us in God's own image and likeness. **ALL OF US.** And while we are all deeply fallen, we are all highly valued, and greatly loved. So loved are we that the baby who looks like *all* of us, grew up to die for *all* of us.

Two years after this song was published, Alfred was diagnosed with lung cancer and died a year later at age 33. Wihla continued her work for years and published a number of carols. She died shortly before her 101st birthday.

Alfred Burt and Wihla Hudson had it exactly right. Children do see Jesus in different ways. This is good and right because Jesus came for the whole world. Jesus belongs to all of us.

We heard in John's gospel this morning, "No one has seen God." It is only through Christ that we can know Him.

You and I, *all* of us, really need to catch a glimpse of the Christ who loves *all* of us, and we need to proclaim to the world that Jesus belongs to *all* of us, regardless of our language, our culture, our skin color, or our nationality.

May we come to see Jesus with the heart and eyes of children. And let this prayer be ours:

*Lord Jesus, give us eyes to see the world as you see it,
and give us a heart to love the world as you love it.
Thanks be to God. Amen.*