

The Feast of the Nativity C - Christmas Eve - 24 December 2009

Isaiah 62:6-12; Titus 3:4-7; Luke 2:(1-7) 8-20

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As the shepherds look upon the baby Jesus lying in the manger; as the man Joseph watches with fascination this child lying peacefully in his mother's arms; perhaps even as Mary herself gazes at the baby to whom she has just given life, do they know, can they know, that no one less than God is looking back at them? How could they know, how could they guess, how could they possibly imagine that God has come to be with them, to be among them. But even more than this: that God has come to be helpless before them all.

This, I think, is what makes the story of Jesus' birth both very moving and inspiring, on the one hand, and also quite beyond belief on the other. For the skeptic, to believe that God exists at all is difficult enough. And that's understandable. Right now, things are tough. And at such times, a culture like our own will confuse cynicism with wisdom, pessimism with intelligence, and narcissism with insight.

The claim that God came in person is predicated upon the assumption that God exists in the first place. When circumstances seem to be governed by chaos, people find it difficult to accept the premise that God is watching over us, thus seems to be allowing all this personal calamity and global distress without stepping in to fix it.

But accepting for a moment the proposition that God does exist, the next difficulty people have with Jesus is that God would come not with vengeful anger, not with lightning bolts flashing and thunder booming, dealing out justice and punishment; but with nothing more than the coo and cry of a baby boy. If God were to come at all, the thinking goes, why would God fail to come in power and might and fix everything that's wrong with the world? More personally, why would God not come in power, might, and mercy - there must be mercy when things get personal - and fix my life?

But there is something about the story of Jesus' birth. There is something about experiencing it again when listening to it told or read aloud. There is something about

witnessing it in a simple children's pageant or a complex representation on film or stage. There is something about this story that moves people past their cynicism to rediscover and reclaim the faith as of a child that still resides within. There's still something about this story that moves the confirmed cynic to want to believe, even if he or she is yet unable to do so. Christmas time stories often have a figure like this around whom the drama unfolds. The most recognizable may be the struggling miser from Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*, Ebenezer Scrooge. But there are others. There is Granville Sawyer, the psychologist who gives Kris Kringle a bogus psychological evaluation in the story of a *Miracle on 34th Street*. There is Jessica Riggs' unhappy father John, in the movie *Prancer*, and Addie Mills' father James in the story of *The House Without a Christmas Tree*.

People recognize these folks either because they have someone like this in their own life's story, or because they are or have been similarly bitter themselves. The truth is, no one wants to be this way. Think of the most disagreeable soul you've ever met, or that you still know. The truth is, he or she does not want to be this way. It may be hard to believe, but this person is not happy to be unhappy, or to be making others around him or her unhappy, too. It may be hard to believe, but the childlike believer within you knows this to be true.

The people of God in ancient times were very unhappy. They had lost their land, their freedom, their identity, their close relationship with God; and they have just about lost their hope that things will ever be better again. When prophets like Isaiah, from whom we hear tonight, bring them good news from God, the good news includes a note of punishment for those who have made them people unhappy.

'I'm going to exclude your enemies,' God says through Isaiah. 'I'm going to starve them of food and drink, and eventually they will pay.' And being the unhappy captive people that they are, God's people are happy when they hear this. 'Somebody else will be unhappy for a

change,' they think. 'Well, it's about time. That day cannot come soon enough.'

Their circumstances make them people whose lives are under the chaotic control of others. They are people who see no reasonable sign of a better day in the future. They are a defeated people surrounded by a culture that persists in teaching them that might makes right, that goodness is a futile game, and faith in God is a child's fantasy. And now part of the hopeful word they hear tells them that someday soon, somebody else will be unhappy for a change. And so one can understand, I think, why this is what they want to believe. The question is, is this really what God wants people to believe?

It came upon midnight clear that a stable lamp was lighted and the low were lifted high. The story of Jesus' birth suggests that God offers something more worthy in which you and I may rightly believe, something more wonderful, than just us finally getting what we think others already have.

Joseph is working man and Mary is his fiancé. Yes, he and his people are subject to the rule of the Romans. They are not free people. And in fact, it is due to Romans that Joseph and Mary must drop everything and go to his ancestral home to be registered and taxed. It is extremely inconvenient. Mary is quite pregnant now. And Joseph is about to become the dad of a child he did not father.

Not of their own choice, but at the command of others, they must now travel ninety or so hard miles to crowd themselves with masses of other travelers into a village already filled up well beyond its capacity. And here the Almighty whose power once parted the waves of the sea cannot or will not part even the crowds to make a place for God to enter in. Here, the fulfillment of God's promise to show up in person and make things right again is realized in nothing more majestic than a newborn infant.

God decides to share the news with shepherds. Lowly shepherds, smelly shepherds. People stuck, perhaps, or who simply chose to be, doing a job that few others are willing to do. Why tell shepherds? Why not tell people of greater influence and credibility? Of course, one may respond simply, 'Why *not* shepherds?' But it's also worth considering, I think, that it may be, though we cannot know for sure, that God is trying to tell other people, too.

All of heaven is singing. 'The child of God is born!' The universe is shouting and celebrating. 'In person, God is come.' God is trying to tell everyone, but is finding only a few who are listening, only a few who are willing to entertain the possibility that God really might come into their own world, their own time, their own lives.

Thanks be to God, these simple few, these lowly few, these homeless few, these faithful few discover that God honors the hope, God keeps the promise. They discover that God does come, and not with a vengeance, but with sweet cry and a gentle smile.

There are those in the story of Jesus who never grasp the blessing of his birth. For them, the notion that God would come at all is already too difficult to believe. But their story is bitter and so, better told some other time. For now, it is enough to celebrate the freedom won in the beginning of it all by just a precious few. For now, it is enough to celebrate freedom from fear, from confusion, from cynicism, pessimism from socially sanctioned selfishness.

This is the freedom that inspires authors to tell us of fathers, once sad and bitter, who, in the end, turn to their little girls with tears of joy at the sight of a Christmas tree in the living room, or of a reindeer wandering off into the snow. This freedom inspires the author to tell us that, in the end, Scrooge "became as good a friend...and as good a man as the good old city knew...;" "...that he knew how to keep Christmas well, if any man alive possessed the knowledge."

There is a freedom born in this simple meeting of humanity's gaze upon the child with God's gaze back upon us all. Gently, God is looking upon us this night and upon the world around us, and setting us free to hope again. Softly, God is speaking to us this night, and to the world around us, and setting us free to believe. God is holding us close this night and setting us free to be filled again with joy.

And so may God, who wonderfully created us, and more wonderfully restores the dignity of human nature, grant that we may share the divine life of the One who humbly shares in our humanity, Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.