

Christmas Eve Late
December 24, 2015

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The Angel said to the shepherds, “This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.” In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Tonight, like the shepherds, and like the angels, we gaze at this newborn baby. He is the Son of David, He is Christ the Savior. The hopes and fears of all the years are met in this stable tonight. Can such tiny shoulders carry the weight of our hope? Can such tiny hands forge the new world we long for? We don’t know. We can’t imagine it. But then there are the angels. They seem to have no doubts at all. They cannot contain themselves, but erupt in shouts and singing: “Glory to God in the Highest, and peace to his people on earth!” This is the beginning of the victory. Just as D-Day was the beginning of the Allied Victory, so this is the beginning of the defeat of sin and death. With this birth, the first troops have landed and established a beachhead. The angels tell us this is the one who is to save us, who is to bring peace, who is to defeat every tyranny, who is to sunder every bond, who is to heal every illness, who is to feed all the hungry, who will defeat death itself. And all we see is the baby in manger.

When God decided to save the world from sin and death, when God decided to establish justice and peace on the earth, when God decided to bring divine power to earth to make this world as good as it should be, why did he send a baby? What can a helpless baby do?

As the words of one of our hymns puts the question and answer:

Dost thou in a manger lie, who hast all created,
stretching infant hands on high, Savior, long awaited?

If a monarch, where thy state? Where thy court on thee to wait?

Scepter, crown, and sphere? Here no regal pomp we see,
nought but need and penury: why thus cradled here?

“For the world a love supreme brought me to this stable;
all creation to redeem I alone am able.

By this lowly birth of mine, sinner, riches shall be thine,
matchless gifts and free; willingly this yoke I take,
and this sacrifice I make, heaping joys for thee.”

This is the promise. Despite appearances, this baby will be our savior. What is weak will be stronger than all. What is powerless will wield all power.

How can this be? Why a baby? Let us consider how we react to babies.

Nobody can ignore a baby. Whenever you see one in the super market you will always see another adult going over and making silly faces or silly noises at the baby. Or asking its mother all sorts of questions. How old is she? What’s his name? Babies create relationships between strangers.

Babies seem to be little miracles. They have all their parts, but, oh, so tiny! Ten little fingers. Ten tiny fingernails. They make us pay attention to details and take us out of our self-absorption.

People let down their guard around babies. Babies make people feel protective and gentle. We want to soothe them when they cry, feed them, keep them warm. Babies do not threaten us. Their vulnerability invites us to protect them, to love them, to serve them. Babies makes want to serve the weak.

Babies are also little aliens. We cannot really communicate with them. We cannot know what they are experiencing. When they cry, we have to guess what they want or need. Babies makes us stretch our perceptions so as to grasp what lies behind the behaviors. Babies makes hunger to understand

Babies represent the future, and they make us think back on when our children were babies, or when we were little ourselves. At one gathering in my family, there was an infant present. One of the elders considering the child, remarked, "He has all the intelligence his is every going to have; all he needs is experience." What experiences will shape this new human being? There is so much promise, and also not a little anxiety, for we know all too well what harsh treatment the world can deal out. Babies makes us think about our place in the world and what God's purposes for us may be.

Any baby can do these things. Here we are once again gathered to wonder at this miracle. The miracle of a new life. The miracle of a mother's labor and love. The miracle of a new person, who will be unique and yet part of all of the human race. So maybe God knew what he was doing after all.

And this baby is the most of special of such miracles. The miracle of God present in human flesh. It might not have happened. Mary could have refused the angel and not welcomed the Divine seed. Joseph might have refused to protect and love Mary. The birth could have gone badly. But no. Everything is alright. More than alright; it is terrific. In this baby humanity and Divinity are united. In this birth the heaven is brought to earth, and earth is drawn into heaven. In this birth the worlds are reconciled. In this birth the chasm between God and each of us is bridged. The walls that separate our self-centered and narrow lives and the broad, open life of

God are broken down. In this birth our self-protective fearfulness is swallowed up in God's self-giving joy.

As another hymn puts it:

What child is this, who, laid to rest, on Mary's lap is sleeping?

Whom angels greet with anthems sweet, while shepherds watch are keeping?

This, this is Christ the King, whom shepherds guard and angels sing;

Haste, haste to bring him laud the babe, the son of Mary.

In this baby God is present among us. In our wonder and our joy we join in the Angels' song: Glory to God in the Highest and peace to all of us on earth.