

## **Unto Us a Child is Born**

A sermon preached at Lutheran Church of the Holy Trinity, Vallejo, CA  
January 1, 2012

Texts: Is 61:10 - 62:3  
Ps 148  
Gal 4:4-7  
Lk 2:22-40

Happy New Year! Although New Year's Day is not included in the liturgical calendar, it certainly merits our noting its passage here. Some Christian traditions observe the turning of the year on New Year's Eve with what are called Watch Night services. Watch Night is a time to remember the goodness of God during the past 12 months, to sing and pray out the old year and welcome in the new one. The custom originated with the Moravians, was later adopted by the Methodist movement, and is now strongly associated with the African American tradition. Watch Night calls for a renewal of our covenant with the Holy One and a celebration of God's message of liberation in the coming of Christ. So in the spirit of Watch Night, please join me in prayer:

We have waited for the Christ Child, for you, O God in flesh,  
And now comes this long-expected Jesus,  
Innocent, vulnerable, full of grace and truth:  
grace and not power, truth and not wealth, mercy and not control.  
We pray for the gift of your spirit,  
to open our eyes and help us to see your face,  
to open our ears and help us to hear your voice,  
to open our hearts and help us to love as you love.  
Give us newness that we may start again, at the beginning.

Now actually, we in the church should have wished each other a happy new year about five Sundays ago, on the first Sunday in Advent. Advent marks the beginning of the Christian year, and I often wish that we paid as much attention to it as our Jewish sisters and brothers pay to Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year that falls mostly during the month of September. In

Advent we are waiting, much as Simeon and Anna in our gospel reading are waiting, much as Jill and the whole Martinez family are waiting, in Advent we are all waiting for the arrival of a child whose birth will really rock the world. And that birth finally comes to pass, according to Luke's account, in some pretty unlikely circumstances for the Son of God and Savior of the World. I can't imagine having to travel overland, away from home, for 80 miles or so and nine months pregnant. Or having a barn for a birthing center. Or seeing total strangers, shepherders no less, show up for the very first post-partum visit. What kind of God does this?

Maybe that God is inclined to show up in the oddest of places, like the funny papers. For years I've been reading the comic strip called "For Better or for Worse." It's the rambling, sometimes endearing, story of a lovely Canadian family, the Pattersons: parents John and Elly, children Michael and Elizabeth, and Farley the dog. One of the reasons I love it is that it's actually in its second run, the story being repeated from the beginning, just as we do in the church year when we revisit the birth and ministry, the death and rising of Jesus Christ, and the story of his followers that is also our story. Anyway, last Sunday's strip related the end of Christmas Day in the Patterson household. John is attempting to cajole the kids into going off to bed voluntarily. (You can tell he doesn't do this very often: what kid goes to bed voluntarily, especially on Christmas?) After a couple of exchanges, Dad finally lays down the law: "That's it!" he says firmly. "Christmas is over." To which Michael, perhaps unaware of his own insight, replies, "But, Daddy -- it only just got here!"

Yes, Christmas only just got here, and for the next few Sundays we'll go at breakneck speed, gospel-wise, until Lent pops up in late February. Next Sunday is already the baptism of Jesus, so in one week he ages two or three decades: a dizzying pace of development! The church calendar doesn't give us much opportunity to consider Christmas, the wonder and

amazement of that birth. It only just got here. So let's at least take this time to reflect on this miracle of the Incarnation, Emanuel, God-with-us, the one who came to share our human-ness in all ways. Martin Luther suggests that we "meditate upon the Nativity just as we see it happening in our own babies. I would not have you contemplate the deity of Christ, the majesty of Christ," Luther wrote, "but rather his flesh. Look upon the baby Jesus." On this subject, Luther further observes with his characteristic insight into human nature, "Divinity may terrify man. Inexpressible majesty will crush him. That is why Christ took on our humanity, that he should not terrify us but rather that with love and favor he should console and confirm." The man had a way with words!

Of course, any of us who are parents can't help but recall the births of our own children when we look upon the baby Jesus as Luther advises. Our lives are changed forever with the arrival of this new life in our midst, and how much more so with the arrival of the child Jesus, born among outcasts and visited by misfits. You probably know the low repute in which shepherds were held in first-century Palestine. At best they were considered dishonest, the last, the least, and the lost, the bottom one percent. Kind of a cross between the rustic fools of Shakespearean comedy (think *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, or *As You Like It*) and the folks who send you those emails informing you that you've won the Irish sweepstakes and if you'll just send them a few thousand to cover the cost the currency conversion -- that's the shepherds. No wonder the apostle Paul saw wisdom in the foolish and strength in the weak. "Not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth," he wrote of the church in Corinth, and that certainly describes these shepherds too. And yet, in Luke's telling, they were the first evangelists, the first to spread the word of the coming of a

Savior, the good news from God. What kind of God entrusts this good news to such unlikely messengers?

I know you've heard what has been called the Chinese curse, although I've also heard it as a Spanish toast: "May you live in interesting times." Certainly Jesus came into the world in one of those times, and I don't think anyone will argue that we live in a humdrum, predictable and boring world today. The poet Mark Jarman has recently published a poem with the title, "Interesting Times," which begins this way: "Everything's happening on the cusp of tragedy, the tip of comedy, the pivot of event./You want a placid life, find another planet. This one is occupied with the story's arc." And we in the church are surely occupied with the arc of our story, the story of Jesus whose arc begins with Christmas, or better, with creation: "In the beginning was the Word...and the Word was God." Our gospels give us glimpses of this arc from different vantage points, and so we love the stories in Luke where Jesus is recognized, by shepherds and by Simeon, who says, "I can die happy now that I've seen you," and by Anna, who can't keep from telling everyone around her about this child. Can't you just see Anna holding Jesus and proclaiming something like, "Have you ever seen such a one as this?" And Simeon, giving thanks aloud for what Jesus will bring to the world as he moves along the arc of his life on earth? I like to think of them as the grandparents in this story, full of admiration and praise and wonder and unstinting love in the presence of this baby. As they lean over the baby, they lean into the future, like flowers leaning toward sunshine. And we lean along with them.

Of course, we know, as Simeon implied in his words to the new mother, that there are also going to be tough times ahead. There's always an "And Yet" in every story, and in the Jesus story we have named that "And Yet" as the theology of the cross. That is part of that future that

we lean into, for sure. Mary has already pondered this future for her son, and the poet William Butler Yeats gave voice to her foreboding in his work, "The Mother of God":

What is this flesh I purchased with my pains,  
 This fallen star my milk sustains,  
 This love that makes my heart's blood stop  
 Or strikes a sudden chill into my bones  
 And bids my hair stand up?

You know that we will live into that part of Jesus's arc, as we do each year. But for now, let us participate fully in the joy of the new birth, the one that has already been, and the one that is coming. God has given us such newness that we may start again, at the beginning. Such beginning, at Advent, is nowhere celebrated more joyfully than in this poem by Ann Weems, entitled "This Year":

I wonder if God comes to the edge of heaven each Advent  
 and flings the Star into the December sky,  
 laughing with joy as it lights the darkness of the earth;  
 and the angels, hearing the laughter of God,  
 begin to congregate in some celestial chamber  
 to practice their alleluias.

I wonder if there's some ordering of rank among the angels  
 as they move into procession,  
 the seraphim bumping the cherubim from top spot,  
 the new inhabitants of heaven standing in the back  
 until they get the knack of it.  
 (After all, treading air over a stable and announcing at the  
 same time can't be all that easy!)  
 Or is everybody—that is, every "soul"— free to fly  
 wherever the spirit moves?  
 Or do they even think about it?

Perhaps when God calls, perhaps they just come,  
 this multitude of heavenly hosts.  
 Perhaps they come,  
 winging through the winds of time  
 full of expectancy  
 full of hope  
 that this year

perhaps this year  
(perhaps)  
the earth will fall to its knees  
in a whisper of "Peace."

Amen.