

Christmas Eve

December 24th, 2006

*Episcopal Church of Our Saviour
Mill Valley, California*

*What Child is This?
by The Rev. Richard E. Helmer, Rector*

Now that I've been a dad for three years. . . thirty-eight months, twenty-four days, ten hours, thirty minutes. . .well, who's counting, right?

. . . but at last I think I can say with some authority that children are strange.

Any of us who are parents know that starting a family means welcoming some level. . .maybe a high level. . . of chaos – an overturned appcart of carefully ordered lives. Of learning the hard way to conform to a schedule best titled as “life interrupted” by strange, unpredictable bundles of energy. . .

. . .and that universe that seems to somehow fall towards their gravitational centers: whether swaddling clothes or diapers, groceries, tuition, bills, taxes, toys, doting friends and family, or other children.

Much the same it must have been for Mary and Joseph two millennia ago, when their first-born came into the world at the edge of empire, into a lowly village in Judea, amongst animals and shepherds skirting the civilized world. Joseph and Mary weren't married and were away from home and the warmth of family. That was strange enough.

But Jesus was their firstborn, an event to be celebrated in an age when male children were the best way to continue a bloodline and a family legacy. Yet Jesus, with all the usual strangeness that babies have with their scrunched-up faces and other-worldly cries, was even stranger.

From the early centuries, Christians depicted the baby Jesus in iconography several ways – almost always with a halo of light surrounding his head – a mark of some special divine blessing or purpose. Sometimes he was depicted as a tiny, but fully-formed man, gazing lovingly at his mother or out at us who give him peculiar titles and talk about him a lot. Sometimes he was swaddled peacefully asleep, the watchful shepherds, wise men, and animals standing by, with angels looking down or celebrating in the heavens.

Either way, this baby was something quite unusual, perhaps stranger than strange. Luke's gospel has Mary wondering at what it means that the stars themselves seem to predict where Jesus is born, that angels come to foretell his birth, and that shepherds show up – the ragtag of their world – to worship.

Of course, if Mary knew what we knew now, she might be terrified. This little baby crying for his first milk and wrapped up tightly swaddled is the keystone of a world-changing tradition. No

matter what we believe about Jesus, his name and what his followers have attributed to him have brought about the destruction of empires and their rebuilding. . . they have greatly influenced the moral, political, and even economic and scientific foundations of a world we now tend to take for granted. The record simply shows Jesus among the most important, if not *the* most important figure in recorded world history.

His actions critical of religious authority and his gruesome death at the hands of an unsavory Roman governor and what his disciples say happened next sparked a movement that would threaten emperors, kings, and princes for generations. His teachings and accounts of him remain the subject of great debate and scholarly inquiry. Christians in many places in the world still give their lives in his name. . .

. . .and whatever awful corruption and warfare have been unleashed by invoking allegiance to this first-century child, the core of his message still speaks, bringing hope even to those who have never entered a Church or lifted their voice to sing his praise. Above all, he is often the light in places far from civilized or peaceful. . .the last hope for those near death. . . the guardian against total despair, even at the gates of illness, suffering, and rampant poverty.

And tonight, we gather to hear the familiar story about his birth and wonder with Mary at all the beginnings of this strange, world-changing child, wrapped up warmly and placed in the manger amongst the straw, the earth, and the smells and gazes of peculiar, yet ordinary people like you and me.

And we call it “incarnation.” That light around his head in ancient iconography means there is something very special about this baby indeed – maybe even the reminder in him that God has come among us not just as a vision or an angel, but as a person with all our fleshiness and fragility. . .with all our ephemeral nature as we pass much like grass, and scarcely a blink in the great cosmic dance. God comes as a person with a genetic and cultural heritage, a worldview, a birthplace and a family. . . made of the earth, and made of the stardust from which we are all fashioned.

“Emmanuel,” God with us, means that everything we thought separated us from divine perfection – and that is a lot, isn’t it? – it means that all that separation is gone. It doesn’t ultimately matter because God has erased the chasm and come not only near, but right into our humanity, beginning with the cries of this newborn child.

We gather to draw comfort from that thought. But we are also challenged by it.

Again, because this baby Jesus is strange. He’s as strange as any human newborn appearing in our midst. . .a bundle of raw humanity without convention, language, culture, or a sense of his own identity. And in some ways, he will grow up to still be even stranger. He will say things like this to us home bodies, “The Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.” He will run out into the wilderness and face down the darkness that lives out there and within us close at hand. He will leave his family and become an itinerant preacher and healer. He will invite others to leave their homes and follow him. He will heal the down-trodden and touch the untouchable. He will defy violence and oppression and cross almost every social boundary he sees for the sake of his

new family of ne'er-do-wells. And he will stand up to the educated and the religious and political authorities at great peril, and lose his life, and then take it up again in a way that defies explanation and has inspired millions to love him and the God he points to.

But for tonight, we have a moment to catch our breath, bask in the warmth of this story yet, and maybe spend time with friends and family before the world again overtakes us with its demands and troubles. For all the strangeness of this baby named Jesus, and the strange Gospel he has yet to bring to us with an invitation for transformed, resurrected lives, he is this night the center of peace and all that is holy and good and just in the world.

He is the baby, small, maybe cute, certainly beautiful as all newborns are. . .he is the baby held lovingly by a mother tired from her labor but joyous to behold her son with her own eyes. Of a father, a carpenter looking out for his family's safety and security, happy to see some of the most unnerving months of his life end with a healthy child. A wonderful thing for shepherds who have been eking a meager living off the wool, sheep, and grass that they know as well as the stars. . .Shepherds who have been given the favor of a visit from angels, and who will not forget what they have seen. They are the first to know. . . they stand at the beginning of a great story that spans humanity.

And we should pause and stay awhile, gazing at this image in our hearts, pondering as Mary pondered what she could scarcely imagine.

Amen.