

**Christmas Eve, December 24, 2007  
St. Francis Church  
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**Text: Luke 2:1-14**

In my house it's not very difficult when you are going through old pictures to tell which photos were taken by me and which by Hathy. It has to do with how we frame things: Hathy's photos tend toward the Hudson River Valley painters—you have a clear sense of where you are, even if you can barely make out the little tiny people in the photograph. Mine, on the other hand, tend toward “big heads”—you know *exactly* who is in the photo (and you can see every line in their faces) but it isn't altogether clear when you look at the photo years later whether you were in Holden or Tuscany when you snapped the photo.

So I am wondering what you see tonight in your mind's eye, and where do you crop the image?

Many of us are used to seeing the borders around the manger scene. A lot of Christmas cards help us to see it in precisely this way and our crèche in the front of the church does the same: the parents and child are in the center of a barn and Jesus has already been wrapped in his swaddling cloths and is lying in the manger. No crying he makes! The shepherds have arrived with their humble gifts and the cattle are “lowing”—whatever that means! (I've never been clear what the difference between mooing and lowing is, but the cows around Jesus definitely low—and in perfect harmony I bet!)

This Advent I've been reading a book called *What the Gospels Really Teach About Jesus' Birth* by Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan. At the beginning of the third chapter they write these words:

*What would you think of a book that started with the opener, 'I am going to discuss Mahatma Gandhi as a Hindu saint, but I'll skip all that distracting stuff about British imperial India.'? Or another with, 'I am going to describe Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. as a Christian saint, but I'll get right to his biography and skip all that stuff about racism in America as background baggage'?*

Their questions are, of course, rhetorical ones, and the answer is that such a book would be of little help and would even be ridiculous. Borg and Crossan take their cue from the birth narratives themselves and step further back—way back. The shepherds in that region are out in the fields keeping watch of their flocks by night when the angels start singing, and you can barely see Bethlehem off in the distance. As Matthew tells the story we get kings bringing gifts but here we get those at the bottom of the economic ladder, the working poor, and that is a big deal for Luke as he understands who Jesus is.

But you need to step back even further if you want to follow Luke's lead, because he clearly intends to situate that birth of Jesus within the context of Roman imperial power. *In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus.* Somehow you've got to move back to Rome to snap this picture, and from there Bethlehem is *way* off in the distance. Because without that social and political and economic context, the message of this night will too quickly become universalized and spiritualized, and ultimately sentimentalized and trivialized. Borg and Crossan argue that if we don't pay attention to that imperial context all we'll be left with in the end are visions of sugarplums dancing in our heads.

This summer Hathy and I had an opportunity to travel in Italy, including Rome. We stayed within walking distance of the Circus Maximus and the Coliseum and the Palatino, the hill which was the nucleus of ancient Roman power and authority. Emperor Octavian was so powerful that he came to be nicknamed the "August One"—or Augustus. It was a period of great political uncertainty globally, and in spite of the claims Caesar Augustus made about being the architect of world peace emanating from Rome (the famous *Pax Romana*), it was in fact a pretty unsettling time. Palestine had been colonized by the Romans and so from the perspective of God's chosen ones, they were (as throughout so much of their history) a captive people.

So somehow what we see tonight in our mind's eye has to at least be aware of all of that, even if just peripherally. When I was in seminary I learned about something the theologians call "the scandal of particularity." Tonight is about that scandal—not that a generic deity created the heavens and the earth and then stepped back like a clockmaker to let it tick itself away, but that the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob became flesh and dwelt among us, and had a name: Jesus, of Nazareth. He was born not at the center of imperial power but on the edges of it; he grew up seeing the world from the perspective of the dominated, not the dominators.

When the claim is made that Jesus is the true prince of peace, that claim is a counter-cultural one; not some abstract or generic pipe-dream. It is to say Jesus is Lord, not Caesar. It is to say that we are about building up the Kingdom of God, not the kingdoms of this world. It is to say that the power of love is stronger than the love of power. It is to situate the birth of Jesus in a real place and time and that place is not on Palatine Hill, but in the city of David—on the edges of the empire.

*Unto us a Son is given...* We can zoom in so far that there is nothing left in our frame but Jesus, and that too conveys truth. Indeed the claims we make about this child as Son of God, and Prince of Peace and Wonderful Counselor and Mighty God insist that we not leave here tonight without drawing in real close to get a close look.

I snapped photos of both of my kids moments after they were born that were so close up you can't tell what hospital you are in, or even who is holding them—because the frame is trying to get in every inch of the wonder and beauty and joy of new birth. Here, too, the scandal of particularity is at work. We come here tonight to adore him, this king of kings and lord of lords. (Again, not Caesar.)

But there is much that we in Western Christianity have to learn from our sisters and brothers to the east, and the orthodox icon on the cover of your bulletins tonight is a helpful frame. Even I know that while I treasure those photos of my boys where they are alone, they don't fully capture what happened in the delivery room. The best photos are the ones where Hathy or I or a grandparent is holding this new-born son. Love is relational and love is about our willingness to be vulnerable with one another, and the scandal of the Incarnation is that it is the same way with our God. We see this Jesus not alone but in the love between mother and child. Mary and Joseph are not incidental here. They will take this child back home to Nazareth and sit by him when he gets the croup, and bandage his skinned knees and read whatever the first-century equivalent of *Good Night Moon* is to him. They will be scared out of their minds when as a twelve-year old he gets lost in the temple, and scared even more when at sixteen he starts driving and both sad and proud when he packs his bags and heads out into the wilderness to make his way in the world as a young man.

Jesus is dependent upon the care and love and nurture of his parents. We may be uncomfortable talking about it this way, but those swaddling cloths will need to be changed if baby Jesus isn't going to get a diaper rash. He'll need to be fed and bathed but most of all loved. To become a child is to become vulnerable. When the Word becomes flesh it means that God becomes vulnerable, entering into

relationship with humankind not from the top-down but the bottom up. If you think I'm exaggerating then remember again what Jesus does on the last night of his earthly life: he kneels before his friends and washes their feet. He comes among them as one who serves.

When your friends ask you what this Christmas Eve sermon was about, I hope that you don't just respond that Rich takes better photos than Hathy does. You don't have to choose: we are, after all, Episcopalians! And the point I am trying to make is that I think Baby Jesus deserves a whole album of photos taken from different perspectives and different angles!

And of course that is where all of us come in. This is not a photography class; it is a celebration of the Holy Eucharist on one of the two great feast days of the church year. We gather here tonight to celebrate the Nativity of our Lord and each of us see that event from a different angle—a different perspective. It makes a difference if you are grieving the loss of someone dear to you this Christmas, or suffering from depression, or if you've had a life-changing experience in the third world, or if you've just come back home from your first semester away at college or if you have little ones in your house.

What if when we sang, "do you see what I see?" we were to write a new song and say, "no, not exactly!" But let's compare! To begin to do that is to begin to create community and where two or three are gathered together Christ is born among them again. It is to create a space where Christ can come again into this time and place, not just in our hearts but in the flesh. The Word becomes flesh in and through us as we encounter each other, and in so doing we encounter the living Christ.

Even the holiest of Advent seasons tends to be a blur for most of us and it goes by way too quickly. It may be hard for us to focus for a whole lot of reasons and they aren't all about the commercialization of this season either. We carry lots through the month of December and some of it blinds us to the story that is set before our eyes tonight. Luke's words are the same year in and year out but we aren't the same. And so as we come together it is worth pausing, worth catching our breaths, worth lingering a while.

*Do you see what I see?* Before we can respond we need to attend to what we see with our own eyes. There is never one final definitive place to stand where we see it all. But for those who have eyes to see, there is much to behold here tonight and

much to consider and reflect on in the next twelve days of Christmas, and throughout the Epiphany season that lies ahead.

Merry Christmas!