

Christmas Eve

December 24, 2009

Tonight I want to talk very simply. I want to talk about babies. After all, tonight, on its surface and in its popular appeal, is about a baby, and waiting for a baby, and having the baby arrive.

This is something we all know about in one way or another—most of us know about it quite personally. How many of you have waited for the birth of the first child to come into your home? Yeah, that's a lot. We know about this. We know the anticipation and the excitement, the planning and the worries, the preparations, the dreams, the expectations. Especially that first time. (Kathleen and I knew double, having spent one Advent waiting for our child to be born, and the next Advent waiting for Will to get here.) For most of us, it's a special and an exciting time. There's nothing else quite like it.

And one of the nice things about waiting for a baby to arrive, (and, yes, this is from a man's point of view) is that you can, from time to time, put the waiting on hold; and go on with regular life. The real changes haven't happened yet, and you can do again during that year of waiting pretty much what you did the year before.

Then all that changes, then it actually happens. There is a huge, a vast, indeed a cosmic, difference between, "we're going to have a baby", and "we just had a baby". Now, everything *has* changed. Now, for better or for worse, there is no turning back to the life there was before. Ever. From the immediate changes of a brand-new schedule and a whole new way of sleeping, to the deeper, for-the-rest-of-your-life changes that come with that new cord tied around your heart that will not die before you do. Grown up or not, that baby has you, and you are forever different.

Christmas is about a baby. It's about child who is born to us and for us—a child who has been promised us since before antiquity; a child who was really and truly born one day a long time ago; but whose birth is offered to us once again on this holy night. Christmas is about this child. Tonight we again hear the story and see the sights and sing the songs.

Now, the really scary thing, the really transforming and life-changing thing that happens when our child, your child or mine, arrives, the really transforming thing that happens is that *you bring the child home with you*. Whether it's from the hospital or from the airport, you bring the child home. That's what makes things different, that's what re-works the world. You bring the child home and you live with him or her, and, God willing, you deal with the demands and the joys and the pains. You watch the child grow up, and, sooner than seems possible, you begin to deal with the adult. (And that is a whole different sermon.) But gradually, as all of that happens, you begin to discover who the child really is, and what that will always mean to you. | | Christmas is about a child, a child born in a manger, a child long-awaited and long hoped for. A very special child.

Now, have you ever wondered why we insist, Christmas Eve after Christmas Eve, on leaving this child in the manger and going home without him? We do. It's an epidemic. We walk in without that child, we do our thing here, and we walk out without that child. So we walk out unchanged, unchallenged, with no new responsibilities, no new agenda, no new or even mildly different lives. We sleep as well as we ever did; and no new cords are tied around our hearts.

Then, about a year later, it's Advent and we get to be expecting all over again. We get wait for the child, with all the good stuff that involves; and then we once more show up for the birth, and once more go home empty-handed.

It's not a bad deal, really, if the only thing we miss is changing diapers, conferences with teachers, braces, and the incomprehensible struggles with adolescence. We get the baby shower without the inconvenience, bother, and constant dread of heartbreak or disaster. Not a bad deal at all.

But this is a special child. This is a different child. This child is God—not God dressed up in a baby-suit pretending to be tiny; but the reality and fullness of God himself come to us, entrusted to us, as a real human child. But he is God also, and we can't forget that for a moment. The hopes and fears of all the years really are met in him tonight.

Now, there is no need to be afraid here. If God had wanted to be feared, he would never have been born into the world as a helpless child. Such vulnerability engenders not fear, but care and love—after all, babies usually bring out the best in us—fear doesn't.

But there is the need for action. The fullness, the wholeness, of what it means for this child to be God is something we can only learn by bringing him home, into our homes and into our lives and into our hearts. We can only discover the fullness of this night by letting this child grow, and grow up, with us and within us.

That means changes. That means our lives can never be the same, indeed our lives will never again fully belong to us. It means that what we do and how we behave and the plans and hopes and dreams we have and the ways we spend our time and our energy and our lives and our deaths will all be different.

After all, this child brings hope, and the promise of healing and of restoration. This child promises us not just a different and a re-directed life, but also a new and richer and fuller life—a life that is rooted in the eternal reality of God and of God's vision of life—God's vision of life for us, and for all creation.

It takes a while even to begin to get all of that worked out and vaguely clear, and to discover the details of the changes that are in store. But that's all right. He will give us all the time we need.

But not even this child can do any of this *if we leave him in the manger*. We have to begin. We have to realize that it is to us—to us personally, and to us as a chosen community, it is to us and for us that the child has come.

So we are here, by the grace and mercy of God, to see the child who is God to us, to welcome him into our hearts, our homes, and our lives, and to take him with us as we leave—so things will never be the same.

Behold, to us a child is born, to us a son is given. Come, let us adore him.