

“The Absurdity Of It All”

In the name of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, who was born a babe in Bethlehem, grace to you and peace.

At the risk of putting you to sleep, on this most holiest of nights, I'd like to ask each one of you to close your eyes. Symbolically, though preferably literally, just for a moment. Imagine that you are holding a new born baby. Imagine how this baby feels - skin touching skin, curves touching curves, harmonious heartbeats as life surges between you. Imagine the smell - the earthy sweetness of breath and body perfuming the air. Imagine the sound - the silent melody of sighing, stretching, settling. Right now, for just a minute, let your imagination go. Feel the baby. Smell the baby. Hear the baby. And rejoice! This very night the baby you hold in your arms is God.

Now as you open your eyes, as you come back to this warm womb of worship, let us think for a minute about the utter absurdity of it all. God – as a baby! Mighty, majestic God, powerful, passionate God, omnipotent, omniscient God – as a baby! God, giving up all the grandeur, coming down - here - crawling inside our skin, vital but vulnerable, resting in our arms. How can this be? It is a mystery. But it is God's mystery and it is God's startling choice.

My friends, holding a baby is the most human of activities and yet it may be the holiest moment some of us ever get. Utterly ordinary yet achingly awesome. How can such a paradox exist?

In her book “For The Time Being,” writer Annie Dillard weaves an utterly bizarre collage of images. One image she keeps coming back to is Nurse Eisberg, an obstetrical nurse in a large urban hospital. Reminding us that 1,000 Canadian babies are born each day. Dillard describes the nurse's work:

“Here on the obstetrical ward, is a double sink in a little room...This is where they wash the newborns like dishes...Nurse Eisberg lifts them gently, swiftly, efficiently...She wipes white lines of crumbled vernix from folds in his groin and under his arms. She holds one wormy hand and one wormy leg to turn him over; then she cleans his dorsal side and ends with his anus. She diapers him...and gives the bundle a push to slide it down the counter.”

A baby assembly line, day after day, week after week – babies processed like canned hams – clean, compact, utterly ordinary. I wonder, would Nurse Eisberg even recognize Jesus if he was born in her hospital and dunked in the sink? Probably not. When you've seen one baby you've seen them all. And so, my friends, either each baby is holy, or none of them are holy at all. I believe that the Christmas story proclaims loudly that every child is holy – that each one of us is holy.

The two ends of the Christmas story are what sets our spiritual saga apart from all other world religions. God as a tiny, helpless baby – God as a crumpled, bleeding corpse. God as utterly vulnerable – God as utterly helpless. God as one who embraces the fullness of human experience in order to sanctify it all. My friends, if you want an ethereal, other worldly, cosmic religion, then Christianity is not your bag. Because, if we don't touch it, if we don't smell it, if we don't live it and experience it and become it, well, then, the Christmas story is dead. God chooses to become us so that we can become like God. The most amazing and distressing consequence of this whole crazy night is that God needs us. God cannot be God without us. Quite simply, without us, this newborn baby God cannot survive.

As any parent sitting in this sanctuary knows, vulnerable babies drastically change our lives. They disturb, they delight and ultimately they demand. Sleep is forever disrupted, anxiety develops angles never imagined, feelings of inadequacy become daily companions, and waves of sadness can, at times, overwhelm us. We become totally, completely enmeshed in the fabric of a baby's life and we are

changed forever. Babies are gifts, but they are costly, exhausting gifts.

And so it is with the baby of God of this night. Tonight God chooses – purposely – chooses to come in simplicity and vulnerability to disturb us, to delight us, and to make strong demands upon us. God comes to enmesh us in the sacred story. And if we choose to pick up this baby Jesus, our lives will never be the same. Self-absorbed ambition and success can never again be our main reason for being. The world is no longer just a backdrop for our own personal agenda. When this baby interrupts our lives, we must begin to think about someone, something, some purpose beyond our own.

And so, when all is said and done, what is being born this night is not only a new image of God, but also a new image of our own self – more mature, more responsible, more ethical, more spiritual than any self we have ever known. Yes, this baby God has come to disturb us and to delight us and to make demands upon our very souls. And this baby needs us to survive.

I will never forget the birth of Hannah, when I was serving in my first parish, very prematurely, weighing only 450 grams, that's just under a pound. Hannah was so small a wedding ring could slide up her arm to her shoulder. Her doctors, at the Neonatal Unit at McMaster in Hamilton, said she had a 5 percent chance of living three days. When I visited Hannah to baptize her, she had two IV's in her navel, one in her foot, a monitor on each side of her sheet, and a respirator and feeding tube in her mouth. She's one pound. The nurse, I'll never forget this, told Hannah's parents that they must be there every day, rub her body, her legs, her arms, with the tip of their finger, even though she was in an incubator. While doing that, they were to say to her how much they loved her. The nurse said the voice be connected to the touch. Who knows, but Hannah today is in her 20's.

Tonight God comes to us a vital, vulnerable child – perhaps a bit premature for automatic survival in our secular world. With lusty voice we sing the carols, we read the story, we proclaim the joy and hope of this season. But, my friends, if our voice does not connect to our touch, if our singing does not connect to our service, well, then, this fresh presence of a fragile God may not survive the night.

One last thought, then I'll close. The Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, which I've been to once and probably never again, is the traditional site of Jesus' birth, and is, in good times, the destination of many faithful pilgrims. There is only one door into the church – only one way to get inside the holy spot. And this door is so low and so small that each visitor must bend low – in some cases, even crawl, in order to enter. Such is the story of this night. God bends low to come as one of us – a baby blessing us – calling us to be nurturers of life. If we have the courage to respond, the courage to stoop low and pick up the child, this baby will fit perfectly into our arms. And we can become participants in God's maturing presence in the world.

My brothers and sisters in Christ. Can you feel the baby? Can you smell the baby? Can you hear the baby? This is Emmanuel – God-With-Us.

May it be so – for you and for me. Merry Christmas!