

God With Us

Nativity 1 (B) 2023: Christmas Eve, 12/24/23

Well, my friends, it all comes down to tonight. The lights are up, the trees trimmed, and cakes iced, the cookies baked, the geese fattened, the beeves trimmed, the guest musicians lit, and whatever you got for your loved ones, you got. Whatever they got you, you'll be getting soon enough. We hope they like it – we hope we like it – but it's the thought that matters, if you think about it. At least, that's what I like to tell myself. Disappointment is not quite in the Christmas spirit. Besides, the time has come to look over there, under the tree, or in our case on the piano. Come look, come see: behold a child lying in a manger, because there was no room for him in the inn. There was no room anywhere for the holy family in this full-to-bursting little town where no-one was expecting them, where nobody knows their names. House of David or no House of David, these people are not his people yet. None here knows his mother or dad, so he and they will have to make do with whatever they brought with them or could find or finagle on the road. At least there was a barn, a stable, where they could rest this night, far from home.

Yet that will be enough. A cow byre and a donkey's trough are warm and dry enough to keep them safe, if a bit itchy. They will give his mother a safe place to have her baby, though we hope nothing goes wrong. If all goes well, they three can rest a bit after a long journey that neither Mary nor Joseph wanted or needed, but had to take anyway. The people had to be enrolled so that they could be taxed, after all, or so thought somebody with the power to make everyone move around. If it's a hardship to take some two months off from the carpentry business you've worked so hard to build up, Joseph, don't worry. The people taking your money will help you out, surely, should you come up short.

As if. Well, as the saying goes, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health. Mary and Joseph are one flesh now, married in the eyes of God and one another and whatever authority signed off on these things in their day. That's why she had to go with him all the way from Nazareth to Bethlehem, the town and city of David, of whose house and lineage he was. The scriptures would have it so since they had been read to have it so, have these two hoof it from the north of Israel to its south with naught for company but a donkey. It sealed their marriage far more than any cleric's blessing or wedding feast could've done. They were in this together now, fully committed. What's more, they had a child on the way who would change everything, so long as they made it through, did their part, and took care. They had to love this child and one another with everything they had, for no-one else would. That was the point, after all. That's what Mary signed them up for the moment she said, to the angel, "Let it be..."

In choosing to be mother to the son of God, that is, Mary also chose the man she loved to be that son's father while he was young. Joseph would, if nothing else, show Jesus what it meant to love a woman, to love children, and to be a man worthy of the name. Your name may be "God delivers," I'm sure Joseph told him in later years, but never forget who it was delivered you, buster. It sure wasn't any stork – and it wasn't an angel, either. You and your heavenly father can chat about that someday, have a good laugh about how you stuck this seventeenth-great grandson of David in the middle of nowhere with dealing with a birth and the afterbirth with nary a soul to help him, but guess what: we did it. Your mother and I, we did it. The upshot of it all is that under my roof you'll be my son, learn what I have to teach you while there's still time. I hope you're paying attention, Jesus, because whatever God has in mind for you, he wanted you to start it from her and here and with us, so welcome to the world, little one. I promise you'll have more than a manger and a stable to sleep in before long.

Mary, in choosing to give life to God's vision and dream, gives us one image of what it means to bring God into the world. Joseph, in choosing her and then choosing her again, gives us another. Incarnation required no less, not if it was to save for real. God became one of us that we might become God, as theologians have taught for a thousand years or more. The only way to do that is to start at the beginning. God left it to Mary and Joseph to take it from there, though with an angel or two to give a guiding word once in a while. But it fell to the two of them to keep the Son of God safe when he was most vulnerable and helpless. It was up to them to feed him well and meet his needs and form him into a well-functioning human being. What would it all mean when all was said and done? They didn't know and they would not have wanted to, I'm sure. They couldn't have borne it had they known, couldn't have looked at the wood of the manger and foreseen in it the wood of the cross. Yet I'm sure they wondered. What will he become, and what will he do when he becomes who he is?

Given all that happened, Mary could not but have had blue-sky hopes for this child and for the God to whom she, and she alone, gave flesh and the ability to breathe. Justice he would bring, and mercy, casting down those who lorded it over their fellows, and raising up the lowly over whom they lorded it. That's what we heard her sing in her song this morning, the *Magnificat*, My Soul Doth Magnify the Lord, though we have to remember Samuel's mother Hannah sung it first. (God's been trying to save people for a while, and Samuel did his best to help, even if with shabby equipment always deteriorating.) Her son, Mary understood, would save his people, and in doing so, save all people. That appears to me to be why she went along with the project in the first place. No matter what else happens in my life, she figured, making and raising this child will be the most important thing I ever do.

Joseph, in staying with her, must've thought likewise.

Whether they shared all this with the shepherds who came to see the three of them that night, we do not know. It must've been a shock to have had them come wandering in. It's not like it was a common custom, there or elsewhere, for people working out of town at night to come into town in the middle of a work night to visit newborns. They were lucky to get past the town gate, except Bethlehem was not so heavily guarded in those days as it is now, so perhaps it was not so unusual. I hear they are not celebrating Christmas in Bethlehem this year, *in tempore belli* and all that, though have that little town and country ever been more in need of a Prince of Peace? Mary and Joseph must've been bewildered, at least at first. Then, once the shepherds told them why they were there, how they knew where to go, and what the angels had sung to them. They had been happily, or perhaps sullenly, abiding in the fields keeping watch over their flock by night, and were no doubt amazed. A chill ran down their spines – how could it not? A like chill ran down Mary's spine and Joseph as they realized what this meant. The shepherds knew because the night sky shone with the news. What had up to now been a secret shared by two, four, eight people at most, some of whom were muted by God and the rest wanting to tell no-one else, was now common knowledge among common strangers.

They knew it, the shepherds, and now they would make it known. This day has been born for us, in the city of David, a savior, who is Christ the Lord. We have seen it, they told everyone they met on their way back out of town. Our eyes have seen the coming of the glory of the Lord. You won't believe how that glory came. A babe, wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn. That is, a child with no home, no crib, barely out of the weather, born to people with nothing to their names but cloth, a donkey, and each other. Angels sang of it from here to Mars, but it's all up to Mary and Joseph now, at least for now.

We don't know how this will work, just that it will work: God saves. Unto us a child is born, a son is given, and his name shall be called...Immanuel: God with us. Jesus: God delivers. Because they knew it, and made it known, we know it, too.

May the grace of the Nativity, the Incarnation, be with us all this night, and on every day that follows. *Amen.*