

The Arrival of Baby Jesus

A sermon based on Matthew 1:18-25 and Isaiah 7:10-16

Don Friesen,
Ottawa Mennonite Church,
December 20, 1998

Christmas is not about a baby is the banner cry of some at this time of year. Christmas is not about a baby, but about the advent of a Jesus who makes adult demands on us. It's the banner cry of those who've seen one too many cute Christmas cards, heard two too many sanitized Christmas carols, and read three too many one-slogan-fits-all-religions Christmas greetings! Feeling as if they're drowning in a sea of shlock and mediocrity, they maintain that to tell the story of the Baby Jesus is to trivialize the gospel. At this time of the year we need to hear more than Jesus' birth account, they say, and if they could squeeze the "old rugged cross" into the Bethlehem stable, they would!

Resist Romanticism, but Embrace the Baby

I think I understand the impulse. Many preachers do, but some don't and simply cannot resist the impulse to preach sentimental sermons and tell syrupy stories that distract us from the hard work of social reconstruction demanded by the Christian gospel. There is an impelling pull toward a romanticization of very unromantic things, and we are all sucked into it. We get notions of family life into our heads at this time of year that we would laugh at other times of year. We nurse expectations at this time of year that have little longevity or depth, and so disappointment is bound to follow. The romantic glow of Christmas touches everything, even the poor, whom we patronize for a brief period before consigning them back to the streets where our apathetic governments and their populations are content to leave them.

One hears some pretty sappy stories at this time of year, some used to squeeze another tear or two from prosperous and guilt-laden congregants. Out come stories that would qualify for yet another edition of "Chicken Soup for the Whining Soul" (Fredrick Kane), as relatively wealthy middle class patrons are contrasted with the contemporary urban peasant who demonstrates the deeper qualities of the true meaning of Christmas. It's a rather pathetic substitute for the social vision inherent in the gospel.

I can understand the impulse to resist romantic notions of the Christmas story. We can get so caught up in the warm, fuzzy feeling of the small newborn baby in the sweet-smelling hay that we forget that there were people who wanted to kill Jesus right there and then. The Baby Jesus did not sleep in "heavenly peace" as the song tells us; he slept in the midst of danger and death! This child did not grow up to live in some fantasy land free of conflict or strife.

Romantic notions of Christmas do little to lend credibility to the gospel. One family that passed a manger scene every Sunday on the way to church noticed on the Sunday after Christmas that the manger scene had been taken down. Said their insightful preschool son, "Looks like they've put Jesus away for another year."

I understand the impulse to take the focus off the Baby Jesus, but my plea would be this: Don't throw the baby out with the shlock and sentimentality! Resist the romanticism, but embrace the baby! Let's leave the old, rugged cross for Lent and Easter. Let's spend some time with the Baby Jesus, for we can derive spiritual lessons even from his infancy.

Babies Demand our Commitment

One of the lessons Christ's infancy teaches us has to do with the demanding nature of babies. Our Gospel reading begins with "Now the birth of Jesus...took place in this way." (Matthew 1:18) It's a birth notice! A birth notice, announcing the arrival of the Baby Jesus, and as any parent knows, the arrival of a baby is cause for preparation. The first reaction of many modern parents-to-be is to pull out their chequebook. "We're going to need a bigger car," they say, "probably the ubiquitous mini-van." "We'll have to redecorate the nursery," they agree. "We'll need the best stroller, the most perfectly colour-coordinated crib set and the latest, ultra-convenient diaper bag." The list can be as long as any baby-product catalogue, and by the time the baby arrives the parents feel they have more in common with the pack mule which carried the Holy Family to Bethlehem than with Mary and Joseph! (adapted from John and Cathy Bookser Feister)

For many of us the financial demands of a baby are our least concern, for there is little on earth more emotionally demanding than a newborn baby! It begins with the pregnancy. As a woman waits for her baby, she finds that her body is no longer hers to control. There's another life demanding her nutrients and energy. And no matter how endless the last month of pregnancy may seem, the baby comes in his or her own good time! Then there is the better-than-average chance that things won't go as planned. What if the pregnancy is difficult, and bed rest is necessary? What if she miscarries? Parents have no choice but to wait and see. There are no designer babies, at least, not yet. Young parents experience a loss of control. They are not running the show! And with the arrival of the baby they have to adjust to someone that is on the one hand utterly dependent, yet intrudes upon their life in a fiercely independent way.

The Baby Jesus reminds us that we are not in control of our destiny; God is. We can't control or predict the ways and wisdom of God; we can only respond with trust and commitment. The arrival of Baby Jesus was anything but undemanding upon the adults involved, yet it called forth a tremendous amount of commitment, trust and faith.

Babies Rearrange our Lives

Another lesson that the Baby Jesus leaves with us is one parents of newborns can well appreciate, and that is that babies are Re-arrangers, par excellence! One young couple confesses that "parenthood was different from anything we could have imagined.... We were knocked off our rockers! ... We naively thought we would just somehow fit the child into our already busy life-style. We were in control; we had things figured out. ... Probably sleep deprivation made it plain to see we would need to let go of our previous ambitions.... We've each let go of different things during the past five years of parenthood. We've chosen new jobs outside the home, and we've learned how better to be supportive of each other around the house. Our expectations are different. We've lived through a few scary medical episodes..., and have learned to accept (sometimes

even gracefully!) last-minute changes in almost any plans." (John and Cathy Bookser Feister)

A baby has the power to change everything. The watershed of a baby's arrival has been jokingly compared to the calendar demarcations, B.C. and A.D., meaning "Before Children" and "After Delivery". A comedian of years ago (Martin Mull) said that having children is like having a bowling alley installed in your head! Any parent knows that inconvenience and rearrangement is what babies are all about. Every baby worth his or her booties will rearrange everything about you and your placid little life, from your priorities and opinions to your daily and nightly schedules. A good baby can turn even the most rigid parent, who has every conviction rigidly in place and every routine of life precise, into a normal human being.

Inconvenience and rearrangement is what the gospel is about. The arrival of Baby Jesus was hardly convenient for Joseph and Mary. It was hardly convenient for the three Wise Men. It certainly wasn't convenient for Herod! The whole Christmas story, indeed, the whole ministry and continuing significance of Jesus is an exercise in rearrangement. Scattering the proud, unseating the mighty, exalting those of low degree, healing the unclean, embracing the afflicted, sitting at table with publicans and sinners -- this is hardly the stuff of a secure and ordered existence!

There is a transformational power about babies that is not unlike the transformational power of the Christian gospel. Says a New Testament scholar, "From the moment this Emmanuel was conceived he had a way of causing righteous people to rethink what was righteous." (Dale Brunner) For Simeon and Anna, and Zechariah, the arrival of Baby Jesus was an answer to prayer and a cause for lots of singing, even if Zechariah had to wait a while for his song to find a voice, but for other righteous people, like Joseph, the arrival of Baby Jesus was a nightmare, an embarrassment, a confusing shock that required a lot of rethinking about everything on which life was based. Like all babies, the Baby Jesus provokes self-examination, and rather sobering and unromantic is the thought that this child will be the ultimate source of judgment on our lives.

Babies are Born into Real Circumstances

A third lesson that the Baby Jesus leaves us with is a reminder that babies are born into real circumstances. Our Gospel lesson begins with, "Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way" -- a wonderful birth announcement but one that hardly lends itself to romantic notions. Hardly has the announcement been made than Joseph went through conniptions trying to decide what to do about the baby, and about Mary. Mary wasn't all that pleased about the situation either (Luke 1:29). Then came the long trek to Bethlehem at a very inconvenient time. And while the prophet Isaiah may have envisioned a child as the symbol of hope and peace, the arrival of Baby Jesus in reality provoked King Herod to institute a massacre to safeguard his political power and empire, causing the young couple to becoming fleeing refugees overnight.

Babies are born in real time, to real parents, in the context of realpolitik. Unless we've led a very sheltered and protected existence, children are not necessarily the stuff of romantic fantasies. And we don't necessarily have to conjure up images of children in Bosnia and Kosovo. While Canadian children don't usually have to run from sniper fire, in 1989 934,000 Canadian children lived in poverty, and by 1996, only seven years later, the number had risen to 1,481,000. (Statistics from "Let's Invest in Canada's

Children." a brochure published by Faith Communities Caring for Canada's Children, a coalition that includes Mennonite Central Committee)

Babies are born into real circumstances, some better than others, and the Christian memory of the Baby Jesus born into distressing circumstances gives comfort to many children and parents. It is also the scandal of the incarnation, for implicit in the very concept of the incarnation is that God entered our circumstances not to put a romantic glow on things, but to share our vulnerability. This is a God who came among us with few defences, and with no parachute to help him bail out if things went wrong. This is Emmanuel -- God-truly-with-us, all human wretchedness notwithstanding.

Babies Bring us Incredible Joy

Yet one more reason to spend time with the Baby Jesus and to embrace the Baby Jesus is because babies bring us incredible joy. Hardly a Christmas goes by that we don't enjoy those pesky little lambs lingering on the pageant stage. There is an innocence and spontaneity about young children that is contagious, and rare is the person who can't express joy at the arrival of a baby.

Babies are special! Some families wait for years to have a child. For our biblical parents of faith, Abraham and Sarah, it seemed like a century! Some have the joy of adopting, or caring for foster children, or even surrogate children. Some babies come as a surprise, but provide a blessing nonetheless.

The dangers of romanticism notwithstanding, there is something about the arrival of a baby that taps something deep within us. For most parents the arrival of a baby taps into a deep well of love, compelling one to sacrifice for their sake without a second thought. When Mary discovered she was to have a baby, she offered herself to a life of service (Luke 1:38). Joseph stood beside her and did the same (Matthew 1:24), much as all parents do each time they agree to forgo sleep for the sake of their children or forgo some life ambition which would take an unseemly toll on their family.

And despite the dangers of romanticism, especially of a man romanticizing a woman's experience, while a new mom may experience a loss of control during pregnancy, there is also the experience of a new power -- the participation in an intense creation, the use of her very physical, human, earthy, God-given body to make life! Both moms and dads testify repeatedly to the miracle of birth. A newborn child is one of the most powerful symbols of hope and life, as the prophet Isaiah well knew. Birth is a miracle. It's a sign that life goes on. Each new child is a sign of hope and potential.

A writer on Celtic spirituality talks about the Celtic belief that the earth is full of "thin places" -- it might be a rock, a mound in the middle of a meadow, or a spot by a bubbling stream, but in those "thin places" the boundaries between the material and spiritual worlds are so thin that one could almost reach or step across, if ever so briefly. The arrival of a child is such a time for many. Something spiritual invades and pervades our world, filling us with wonder, love, and joy.

All quotations of Scripture, unless otherwise noted, are from the New Revised Standard Version.