

“Mary Had a Baby!”

A Christmas Sermon to the Episcopal Diocese of Central Pennsylvania

by

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Christmas 2006

As our liturgical life of Advent is now bursting into the incarnate joy of Christmas, we are reminded that greatest joys are often experienced when our hopeful anticipations are realized. It is true that we are often surprised in life by gifts of love and caring which come into our lives without request or expectation. C.S. Lewis referred to this as being “Surprised by Joy.” But for the spiritually conscious person, there is that need for which we are perennially aware and in constant hope---that most essential joy of the soul without which life is empty and meaningless. That longing is for the love and presence of God in our lives. Advent reminds us of this never-ending longing; Christmas reminds us of how God continues to visit our humanity with divine presence in every generation and age, entering even into our personal realities.

Sometimes we would wish this longing could be satisfied once and for all; we wish that we could gain a portion of God’s presence sufficient for all times; we wish for a knowledge of God in our experience or scriptures or, even our traditions, so sufficient that we would not have to be in constant prayer and anticipation. But that would be to assume we could contain or control God with predictability; or to embrace a theological assumption that the human soul is sufficient to contain the completeness of God. To interpret God in such a way would mean that God is held subject to our finite thoughts, traditions, and expectations. This is a comfortable concept, I must admit, and a less anxious way to live faith. But, we are never so spiritually in danger as when we feel God can do nothing that exceeds our assumptions about God; or come to a maturity of faith about how God will come into our lives, or for precisely whom his love is affirming. Yet, it is this constant longing of the Christian life, the insatiable quality of the spiritual life---the constant praying with for God’s loving revelation---that keeps us living as people of faith and hope, ready to receive the gift with open hearts.

Sometimes, we are surprised by joy because God comes to us in ways we would least expect. Sometimes, in ways our cultural sensibilities, social mores and faith assumptions have been formed to reject. But it is the faithful, patient, and hopeful longing that causes us to keep praying until we see beyond our fears and assumptions and glimpse the strange beauty by which God has again chosen to be with us.

Think about this: If you had lived 2,000 years ago and were faithfully expecting the incarnation of God into datable human history, would you (in your wildest imagination) have expected a culturally and economically vulnerable ethnic child, born to a couple in a “common-law” relationship? Would you or I be able to accept such a form of love incarnate as quickly as we now sing of it in a Christmas carol? It is only by our persistent and faithful longing for God—a longing which has been rewarded with joy generation after generation--- that we can transcend our cultural and moral sensibilities and proclaim with joy, “Mary had baby!”

I am mindful that this is a difficult year for many in the Episcopal Church, as we struggle to understand how God’s love might come to us in the persons of a woman Presiding Bishop or Christians whose intimate life is lived faithfully with another of their same sex. Some are very pained by the issues; others are equally pained by the resulting divisions. These times do challenge many of our cultural sensibilities, our social mores, and especially our faith expectations. For some (like Joseph) it may feel like more than we can bear. For others (like the Shepherds) it may be joy uncontainable. But, as Bishop, I want all Episcopalians to know they are cherished members of the Church (just as Joseph and the Shepherds are cherished members of the Christmas story). Let us also remember this Christmas that, in the story we celebrate this season, God did choose a strange way to show us the ever expanding arms of Divine love for us and the world. So we continue to pray with longing hearts to know the unknowable God in the unpredictable ways God may choose to be among us.

So, this Christmas I invite you to wait with the Church, to pray with the Church, and to keep ministering to the world with the Church. For as we live and minister together in these times, let us trust God will be with each in wondrous love and assuring grace. Yes, I do believe God will continue to come to us lovingly and assuringly, until once again, in our own time, we have sensed the peaceful joy and mystery of God’s incomprehensible incarnation. And as we wait for that assurance, let us remember the joy we now boldly proclaim: “Mary had a baby!”

+ Bishop Baxter