

SERMONS FROM ST. FRANCIS

Christmas Sermon

Text: Luke 2:1-20

Pr. Robert M. Goldstein

“On Babies”

Babies. It is almost a truism to say Christmas is about a mother and her baby. Although to some that would be a novel idea.

Babies. Carol convinced me she wanted a Lamaze birth and so we went to classes, week after week. I remember being a bit bored with the simplistic lengths the instructor went to teach the Lamaze concepts. You should know that at the time I was at Princeton reaching rather deeply into Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*. Perhaps my impatience could have been forgiven. At other times though, the Lamaze instruction was so simple and wondrous. And that was the truer perception.

Anyway, Carol ended up having an emergency C-section —so much for all that Lamaze! And I was encouraged to go into the operating room to watch. ...Bad idea! As the surgeon cut into my beloved, I fainted and was revived to see a mob of medical personnel around my head while my wife, under anesthesia, lay all by herself. Bad idea. But Carol and baby Lynette who came forth that day were a great joy. Oh, yes, just like the baby Jesus who sleeps so peacefully. So tender, so dependent, so warm.

Babies. I remember bringing Lynette home from the hospital. She screamed all through the hallways, all through the reception area, out through the doors and all the way to the car. It was mid-February in New Jersey. Biting cold and dark. But we loved every minute of it for she meant everything bright, warm and hopeful. Now she's 29 and I love her all the more.

Dear Mary gave birth in Bethlehem —no anesthesia, not quite Lamaze and in rather rude circumstances. I wonder if Jesus screamed like Lynette before he was ready to receive his guests, the shepherds?

Mary may have been gentle in her true faith in God, but this was one little tough gal when you consider after scandalous whispers, the discomfort and the pain of childbirth, surrounded by all the harsh cruelties of winter, of cruel social rules that meant death for illegitimacy, of the struggle just to live through every day —after all that, it's all worth it for her to hold her baby Jesus sleeping so peacefully. So tender, so dependent, so warm.

Jesus, as you lie there, little thing, you are the true meaning of God for us and for the whole world. It's not rocket science. Come back to the good earth and meet his mom, a real brave and tough young woman. Now come back to the good earth and imagine holding this

little blob in your arms. You are embracing the Christian God! It's all there! Can we draw the implications for life from that! We are only beginning to for this 21st century.

For example: One of the great wonders of life is that we can take life much too seriously and only notice its cruelties. And some of us take religion much too seriously so that it turns inhuman. But all of us, no matter where we are in life, really just want to feel a tender touch on our skin, a tender embrace of love. Nothing very complicated in our otherwise complicated lives.

And even though we may have known intimacies in our relationships, we still need that gentle touch, that caring caress, that tender embrace. Our companionships and relationships can enter a forgetfulness of these simpler things. Babies can remind us of healing touch. As Luther would say, take hold of the baby Jesus into your arms and you take hold of God!

Babies. One of the great emblematic poems of the 19th and 20th centuries is Matthew Arnold's *Dover Beach*. It is a haunting melancholic poem because it describes the end of state church culture in the modern world. It uses the withdrawing tide as a metaphor of the withdrawing faith of the Modern world. Let me read from it:

The Sea of Faith

*Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore
Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furl'd
But now I only hear
Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,
Retreating, to the breath
Of the night-wind, down the vast edges drear
And naked shingles of the world.*

Ah, love, let us be true

To one another!

for the world, which seems

To lie before us like a land of dreams,

So various, so beautiful, so new,

Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,

Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;

And we are here as on a darkling plain

Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,

Where ignorant armies clash by night.

The withdrawing tide captures the growing loss of Christian faith in our Western culture –what I have called before the “Constantinian hangover.” As one who grew up in that hangover, to the church I say, “Get over it! It's over, let's move on!” St. Francis is an example of

a church that has gotten over it and is creating a new form of Christian discipleship and is moving on.

Matthew Arnold's solution is that the only reality we can depend on these days is our lover: To be true to one another. This is the only light in a world of illusions, surrounded by a darkling plain of confusion and the madness of pointless wars.

On the one hand it's not a bad prescription, if you have a lover! And a prescription taken by most of us at some stage in this postmodern life. It is still close to the times in which we live. It's very modern –an unspoken creed –especially when societies start falling apart.

But what about the baby Jesus? How does this baby's birth affect the postmodern creed? Perhaps this baby reminds us, as all babies eventually do, not to take our lives so seriously. And yet to take the future of our generation's children more seriously. To move outside of our self-centered selves, our self-important selves, and begin to care about the common good. For babies are always the symbol of hope –just listen to the dreams new parents have for their babies. Baby Jesus sleeps, but radiates hope like his body heat in a wintry world. The meaning of "Christ" in the name "Jesus Christ" one could say.

A church is to be a baby Jesus, a center of deep abiding hope. A nurturing center –nurturing moral consciousness that cares about community, all the kinds of community. Hope should emanate out of St. Francis as it does out of babies little faces. Perhaps Matthew Arnold could have used the metaphor of a baby in its web of parents and extended family –but he had that hangover badly. Like Mary who, having Joseph by her side, found that having this baby was the victory over a wintry and rigidly moralistic world. Baby Jesus gave mother the life of hope.

There are many more implications and applications to draw from this image of mother and child, of Mary and Jesus. Devotion to them, often by the so-called simplest among us, and this is the reader of Kant speaking, that devotion has the seeds of the renewal of the church's confidence for the 21st century.

Anyway, dear Mary and baby Jesus. You love us all and we love you –yes, even the most secular amongst us can't deny a little tugging at the heart. This is surely why the Christ Mass is so merry. So, Merry Christmas to you all! Amen

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