

“It Began with a Baby” 1/2/22
(Sirach 24; Psalm 139; John 1) by Rev. J Koyama

It is the Second Sunday after Christmas and we are already taking our first steps into the new year! I hope that you had a joyous Christmas Eve and Christmas Day and that the coming year will bring you much blessing! Sheryl and I took a whole morning early in the week and took our dog Blaze for a walk along the Tower Road trail up Mt. Toby from the Rt 63 parking lot.

What a beautiful scene it was, with large icicles hanging from the rocks and a silvery sky contrasting with many dots of the gold and brown from the fall leaves poking through the powdery snow. It was as though heaven and earth had come together.

Sirach 24 and John 1: The Incarnation

That is one of the basic themes in this morning’s readings; i.e heaven and earth coming together, in this case in human form. The one whom we celebrated on Christmas Eve is in our midst. As the Gospel of John puts it “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory... full of grace and truth.” The mystery and wonder of all creation is encapsulated in the loving gift of one tiny infant through whom we experience the God of heaven on earth.

Our first reading from the Book of Sirach sets forth the same idea in a different way. God's wisdom (portrayed as a female figure) comes forth out of the mouth of God and roams the length and breadth of creation, before being ordered to set up a tent in the midst of God's people and to minister from that tent. So that the "tent", from our Christian perspective, becomes the flesh of the infant Jesus, and the mystery and wisdom of God dwells within that flesh, and begins a ministry to us from a place in our midst.

These powerful passages represent an understanding vital to our Christian faith that we call the "Incarnation," or the "enfleshment" of God. They tell us that Christ and heaven are not far away and inaccessible, but are as near to us as the flesh that covers Jesus. But more than this, our God is as close to us as those around us who make up the ongoing "body of Christ".

Ours is an ever-present God who not only came to us 2000 years ago in the form of the historical Jesus, but has been present since the beginning and keeps coming back to dwell with us every time a baby is born and a life is lived. So that, if we are looking for Christ in today's world, we need only look with open hearts upon whoever is beside us.

And, if we have the courage to keep our hearts open, there we will glimpse the light of Christ in glory or perhaps the pain of Christ nailed to the cross, offering us salvation, as his light shines through the eyeholes in the tent that is his flesh.

I think it is worth repeating how important it is to recognize the nearness of the Christ child that is being claimed when we talk about the incarnation. Although the Christ child we celebrated on Christmas Eve was born two thousand years ago, and although he was singularly chosen of God, we are no more separated in time from his birth than we are from the infants who are being born at the hospital today. In a very real sense, every child that has ever been born is Christ reborn.

That may sound sacrilegious. But we are talking about a religious paradox that makes it possible to answer the question “Are the babies born today, really Christ reborn?” by saying “yes” and then “no.” And both answers will be right. That is how precious we are in God’s eyes.

Why a Baby?

And so, a good question for this morning is, “Why does God’s revelation come first to us in the form of a baby?” What is God saying to us by

bestowing such value on, and drawing our attention to, this one baby and to babies generally?

There are several basic things that come to my mind when I see a little baby. The first is a sense of wonder and of the preciousness of life. In one tiny body, we witness to the most intricate and complex bundle in the universe. There are literally millions of living parts interacting together and the design, the timing of each phase, the plumbing, the capabilities are nothing short of miraculous.

When we look into the eyes of the newborn infant, we are looking into the inputs of a creation infinitely greater in its overall capabilities than the greatest machines or super computers ever developed; a creature that will become able to experience realities beyond which the eye can see; joy, pain, something called “beauty” and the presence of “God.” We behold a creature capable of self-awareness and consciousness, who will be able to say to itself, “I am alive,” and to comprehend what that means. And, it is a creature that will teach us how to love and be in covenant, because we ourselves once were and in many ways still are, the very miracle we are looking at.

Psalm 139

It seems to me that our first response, when we really reflect on these things is to react in wonder and praise. And I think that one of the best expressions of this wonder is in Psalm 139, which is why I sneaked it into the readings. The psalmist encourages us to recognize ourselves also as creations of this magnitude, praising God with the words: “You created my inmost being; You knit me together in my mother’s womb. I praise You because I am fearfully and wonderfully made...”

I can’t think of a more perfect choice of words, because what God has done by creating us and giving us life is nothing short of “frightening” in its wonderfulness.

Vulnerability

And part of what makes life so frightening is its vulnerability. This is another thing that I think comes to all our minds, when we look upon an infant. As with any precious thing, we have to be careful when we hold an infant. It is as though we are holding a faberge egg. Even the top of the skull is not yet fully formed, leaving a vulnerable soft spot that must be protected.

We can also compare the holding of an infant to the experience of protecting the flickering flame of the candles we hold on Christmas Eve. It is the light of the Christ child and at the same time our own light that shines and flickers, so close is our identity with the infants born to us. The flame is so fragile, and yet the light and warmth it sends forth into the world is the greatest of all gifts. And we find ourselves naturally drawn to protect and sustain it.

Abortion?

There is many serious life matters that these experiences lead us to consider. One that I have not brought up is abortion. It is a hugely contentious issue that brings out many of the very feelings we have just been describing, feelings that lie at the heart of our faith at Christmas time. Because when we speak of abortion we are talking about the power we have to decide whether an infant will be born or not.

I do not want to address the details about when consciousness begins or at what point a fetus can be called a human life. That is one of the many agonizing questions that someone faced with such a decision must ultimately face. But I do believe that the God we celebrate clearly desires that we protect the vulnerable and seek the fulfillment of life for all God's children.

At the same time, I agree very strongly with the idea that, if we expect a woman to give birth to a child she is ill-equipped to raise, that as a society, we do our best to ensure that the child will be cared for properly. And it is clear to me that the current safety net is **not** adequate. We have to recognize that God's desire that we protect and nurture those who are vulnerable does not end once a baby is born.

The Future

And so, I think that, as we start the New Year, I would like to put the accent on one more thing that I believe we all consider, when our attention is drawn to a baby, and that is the future. It is impossible to look upon an infant without imagining good things for the way its life will unfold. We are like Mary who sings the "Magnificat" as she contemplates what Jesus will become and the kingdom that he will usher in.

And as with Mary, who then set about giving the young Jesus a proper upbringing, it also occurs to us that we have an important role to play in "paving the way" for the fulfillment of this new life.

All in all, I think that the way our faith journey each year begins with a child in a manger, has tremendous motivating power! Our identification with our offspring and our desire to provide for their future is so

powerful a part of the image of Godself that God put within us when God formed us, that we are energized to do good things on their behalf, that we might not do for ourselves. Or so it seems to me.

In the coming year, I'm sure we will face our share of daunting concerns. The environment is degrading at an alarming rate, Covid remains a serious obstacle, we live with a crumbling infrastructure, an employment roller coaster, a shortage of child care workers, not to mention the personal challenges that face us.

These situations will require courage and energy to confront. And sometimes we may wonder whether we are doing the right thing and whether it is all worth it. We will ask ourselves "Why am I doing this?" "Why am I willing to make the sacrifice?" And I think that a faithful answer is, "I'm doing it for the children". I'm doing it because I want every child born today to inherit a world in which he or she can come to know what it means to be "wonderfully and fearfully" made in the image of God.

The Answer that is the Seamless Web of Life (cut in half like a baby cut in half (Solomon allusion) to cut the question of God's preciousness in half and fight over (prebirth vs post birth) is equally sad.

- How do we show our appreciation for a gift so profound? By providing a world for the baby to live in, in which that baby can grow and be whole.

- Environment
- Education

- Child Care
- Infrastructure.
- Loving Community
- a framework for appreciating fully the gift of life. – By this I mean a religious framework.