

Christmas Eve 2009
St. Margaret's
Annapolis

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. *Amen.*

In 1925, the newspaper known as the *New York World* celebrated the birthday of Abraham Lincoln with a cartoon that has become something of a classic. Two Kentucky farmers are pictured talking over a picket fence. One asks, "Anything new happen lately?" The other responds, "Nothing much. A new baby was born over at Tom Lincoln's place, but nothing much ever happens around here."

Angels and shepherds notwithstanding, I'm sure there were folks who said the same thing in Bethlehem the night Jesus was born. Can't you picture it? Somebody a few streets over... talking with a neighbor. "Anything new happening around here?" "No. Just a baby born down in the stable. Nothing much ever happens around here."

That's why Luke wrote the story of Jesus' birth the way he did... to make sure that Christians would forever more know that something special had happened that night long ago.

Unlike Matthew's genealogy followed by terse reporting... unlike Mark who told no birth story at all... unlike John who jumps right into heavy theology... it is Luke who tells the story we all remember: a census requiring Joseph to take Mary and go to his city of origin to be counted; the inn with no room except in the barn; shepherds who hear the announcement of angels, prompting them to leave their sheep and find this child.

"...to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord."

We know the story so well that we generally take it for granted. Or worse, we don't really think about it at all. Not really. If we did, we might find ourselves wondering what on earth God had in mind! At the very least, we might be honest enough to wonder what it really means.

Oh, we all know that Jesus came to save us from sin and death. But why this way? Why born in weakness and simplicity instead of power and strength?

The theological term for this event is the **Incarnation**. It means that God has come into the world as one of us. Think about that for a moment. Go

home and think about it some more. If you keep a journal, reflect and write about it. Find books to read about it. There are hundreds, maybe thousands. Because it's an incredible idea. **God came to be one of us.**

To bridge the gap between us, between us and God – a distance of our making, no Gods' – God comes up with the idea to be born as a helpless infant... to endure childhood and adolescence... to (as we say in the Great Thanksgiving) live and die as one of us. Not pretending, you understand. That's one of the great heresies. Not pretending, but truly experiencing life as a human being.

Now, even if you take that at face value, it begs the question: *what does this have to do with you and me?*

About twenty years ago now, the Russian Department of Education invited two Americans to help develop and teach a program of morals and ethics in their public school system. While they were there, they also spent some of their own time working in a large orphanage which housed over 100 boys and girls who had been abandoned or abused.

Near Christmas, they put on a special program during which they told the story of Joseph and Mary and Jesus. Luke's story... with the angels and shepherds... and Matthew's magi thrown in for good measure. Because religion had been underground for so many years during the Soviet era, many of the children were hearing the story for the first time.

After they finished, the children were given simple materials with which to make their own nativity scene: three small pieces of cardboard to make a manger, yellow paper to make straw, small squares of flannel for the blanket, and some felt for a cut-out baby Jesus. As the children worked, they two teachers moved around the room, offering to help if it was needed.

Everything was fine until they got to Misha. Little Misha was about six, and he had finished his project. But when the teacher looked closely, he was surprised to see not one, but two babies in the manger. He called for the translator to ask Misha why there were two babies. Had he not understood the story?

Misha crossed his arms and began to repeat the Christmas story. For such a young child, and one who had just heard the story for the first time, he told it with amazing care and detail... until he came to the part where Mary put the baby into the manger.

Then he began to ad lib: "And when Mary laid the baby in the manger, Jesus looked at me and asked if I had a place to stay."

I told him that I have no mother or father, so I don't have any place to stay. Then Jesus told me that I could stay with him. But I told him I couldn't because I didn't have a gift for him like everyone else.

But I wanted to stay with Jesus so much, so I thought and thought about what I could give him. I thought maybe if I kept him warm, that would be a good gift. So I asked Jesus and he said that would be the best gift ever. So I got in the manger and Jesus looked at me and said I could stay with him forever."

We who are brokenhearted, we who are lonely, who are sick in body or spirit, we who are adrift in the world -- we can all lay our lives down next to this Jesus. That is dear, sweet comfort on a cold dark night, whether in Bethlehem or in Annapolis.

But this cannot be the end of the story. If we stop here, if we take this story *only* for our personal comfort, it will all have been for naught. Mary did not smuggle the savior into the world through her own body... did not go through this night of birthing God into the world *only* for our personal comfort.

After all this -- the pregnancy, the journey, the birth, shepherds and angels -- after all this, if having been comforted we do not turn and make a difference in the world for Misha or someone in desperate need, then this night means nothing.

God has taken on our nature so that we may take on the nature of God! It is up to us to bear God into the world even now.

But how, you might ask?

The father of a disabled child had an answer to that question. He spoke at a fundraiser for his son's special school. After extolling the school and faculty, he stunned the audience when he cried out, "Where is God's perfection in my son? Everything God does is done with perfection, but my child cannot understand or do things like other children. Where is God's perfection in Shay?"

He went on, "I believe that when God brings a child like Shay into the world, the perfection God seeks is in the way people react to this child." And he went on to tell this story...

He and Shay were walking by a park one day when they spotted a ball game going on. Shay looked at his father and asked if he thought they would let him play. Knowing Shay was awkward and unathletic,

he doubted the boys would welcome him. Nevertheless, he went over to the fence and asked one of the boys if Shay could play.

The boy looked to his teammates and then said, "Hey, we're down six runs and the game is in the eighth inning. I guess he can be on our team, and we'll try to get him at bat in the ninth."

Shay grinned as they put a glove on him and put him in center field. At the bottom of the eighth, Shay's team scored a few runs, but was still behind by three. In the bottom of the ninth, they scored again, so with two outs and the bases loaded, the potential winning run was on base -- and it was Shay's turn at bat.

His father wondered if they'd let him bat, but they did. Everyone knew he didn't have a chance. He didn't even know how to hold the bat. When he stepped up to the plate, the pitcher took a few steps forward and tossed the ball softly to Shay, but he swung clumsily and missed. One of his teammates stepped into the box with him and together they held the bat and faced the pitcher. Again, the pitcher moved close and lobbed an easy one.

This time, with his teammate's help, Shay hit a slow grounder right to the pitcher... who could have easily thrown the ball to first, made the out and the game would have been over. But to the father's astonishment, the pitcher picked up the ball and threw it in a high arc to right field, far beyond the reach of the first baseman.

Everyone shouted, "Run, Shay, run!" "Run to first!" The right fielder understood what was happening and threw the ball in another arc far over the third baseman's head. "Run to second, Shay, run to second!" The runners ahead of him crossed home and still the ball arced again. "Run, Shay, run!"

And all eighteen boys -- both teams -- were running behind Shay yelling, "Run for home, Shay!" And when he crossed home, they picked him up and made him the hero of the game. That day, Shay's father told them, those eighteen boys reached God's perfection.

God came into the world as one of us so that we would always have the comfort of knowing that God truly knows what it's like to be human; to bridge the gap; to redeem us. And in the process, to make the whole creation new.

That's where we come in. As surely as Mary was called into partnership with God, we too are called. We are called to smuggle God into the world

through our own bodies. And we do that whenever we do for others what God in Christ has already done for us.

This then is what the Incarnation has to do with you and me: God has taken on our nature that we may take on the nature of God. It is up to us to bear God into the world even now.

Joy to the world! The Lord has come! Let earth proclaim her king!

Amen.

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