

A BABY CHANGES EVERYTHING

Carl Wilton

Lamington Presbyterian Church

December 22, 2019; Fourth Sunday of Advent – Lessons & Carols

Luke 2:1-7

***“And she gave birth to her firstborn son
and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger...”***

Luke 2:7

There’s one statement about parenthood that I believe everyone who’s a parent will agree with: “A baby changes everything.”

Suddenly, you can’t just get up and go: there’s the baby’s needs to be considered. That means it’s harder to go out with your single friends; you tend to gravitate towards the ones who also have children.

If you do get up and go, taking your baby with you, you’ve got to cart around all that luggage babies have: diaper bag, stroller, car seat, portable playpen and all the rest.

Then there’s sleep: let’s not even talk about that — or the lack thereof!

For Mary and Joseph, it was all that and even more. Besides the usual stuff, they had to contend with visits from a couple of angels. One of them matter-of-factly informed Joseph: “The child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.”

Well, *that’s* unusual! That angelic message plunged Joseph and Mary —

and their relationship — into turbulent waters such as they'd never imagined.

But they got through it. For those two, love triumphed over jealousy. Faith triumphed over doubt. Courage triumphed over fear.

Quite apart from angelic proclamations that the laws of nature are being suspended, first-time parenthood is a life-changing experience for anyone. On that subject, Presbyterian minister and novelist Frederick Buechner has this to say (reflecting on the days when fathers weren't so often present in the delivery room):

“When a child is born, a father is born. A mother is born too, of course, but at least for her it’s a gradual process. Body and soul, she has nine months to get used to what’s happening. She becomes what’s happening. But for even the best-prepared father, it happens all at once. On the other side of the plate-glass window, a nurse is holding up something roughly the size of a loaf of bread for him to see for the first time. Even if he should decide to abandon it forever ten minutes later, the memory will nag him to the grave. He has seen the creation of the world. It has his mark upon it. He has its mark upon him. Both marks are, for better or worse, indelible.”¹

Yes, a baby changes everything.

No one's ever ready for it. There's no course you can take that tells you how to do it — though some enterprising teachers have tried. There's no way to obtain a certificate or diploma ahead of time, to declare that you've been trained, tested

¹Frederick Buechner, “Father,” in *Whistling in the Dark: A Doubter's Dictionary* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1988), p. 51.

and fully prepared to shepherd a new human life through the perils of this mortal existence.

As any psychotherapist will tell you, there are a great many people who spend years sorting out the mistakes their parents made, in the course of learning that new job — and finding ways to forgive them, even as they in turn are having children of their own, and making a whole different set of mistakes. The cycle continues, generation after generation: the most important job in the world, and no one adequately trained ahead of time. (I wonder sometimes how any of us survived!)

It's a crazy system, but it's the only one we've got — so we all do well to make the best of it.

Which is, after all, exactly what Mary and Joseph did. They made the best of it.

Mary certainly learned a few things from her older cousin, Elizabeth. She and her husband Zechariah had received their own bombshell angelic announcement, about her conceiving a child in her old age. Zechariah, a local priest, was so shook up, he lost his voice for a while — quite the occupational hazard for a man who relied on his voice for a living. Those two likewise learned

how a baby changes everything.

Not many months after that, Mary and Joseph learned of the need to travel to Bethlehem. Nine months pregnant, Mary continued to make the best of it — as did Joseph, banging on the door of every inn and guest house in Bethlehem, until he found that grumpy old character who led them back to the stable and showed them the pile of clean straw that would make do for a delivery room.

“And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth and laid him in a manger.” A manger — a feeding-trough: surely not the cradle she’d imagined for her little Jesus! But it was the place to which the Lord had led her, so surely it was the right place, after all.

The news Mary received from the angel, that seemed so remarkable at the time, is no less remarkable in the year 2019. I’m not talking here about a miraculous conception — which is, after all, a rather insignificant detail in the full context of the story — but rather the greater miracle we call “incarnation.” Literally, the Latin means “in the flesh.” The Christian church has always maintained, as a central doctrine, that in the birth of Jesus, God entered the world in exactly the same way as each one of us entered it.

We’ve grown used to hearing that claim, over the years — so our response

may be “ho hum, tell me something I *haven't* heard” — but try for a moment to imagine what that claim must sound like to anyone hearing it for the first time.

God. Becoming. Human.

God is *holy*: as the scriptures frequently point out. The word “holy” means “set apart.” Something that’s holy is fundamentally different from the life — and even the world — we know. Between the holy and the ordinary is a gulf that can be breached in only the most exceptional circumstances.

At the very center of the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem there was a room known as the Holy of Holies. It was, according to ancient belief, the place in this world where God was most reliably present. No one was ever permitted to enter that space but the High Priest, and then only on one day a year: on Yom Kippur, the dread Day of Atonement, when the High Priest would plead with the Lord not to blow away the sinful human race with one fiery blast of judgment.

Tradition has it that, in the latter centuries of Temple worship — before the Romans destroyed the place in the year 70 — the High Priest would never enter the Holy of Holies unless he had a rope tied around one foot. The other end of the rope was carefully tended by another priest.

There was a reason for this odd practice. If the High Priest should be less

than forthcoming in making his own confession, and if he should then fall down dead in the presence of the *shekinah* — the bright cloud of God’s presence that was said to fill that little room — then his fellow priests would be able to use the rope to haul his body back out, for none of them could enter that space without themselves being struck down dead.

This is not the image of God most of us have, especially not in the Christian tradition — and for a very good reason. We don’t think of God that way because everything changed for us in that Bethlehem stable: in that moment when whoever was attending Mary — it could have been a midwife, or it could have been Joseph himself — took that naked baby boy, wiped the blood from his body, and laid him, still connected by the umbilical cord, on his mother’s breast. And Mary, weeping tears of joy and exhaustion, looked into his eyes for the first time, and she was overcome with the wonder that here was not only the son she had long expected, but God in the flesh.

There was no *shekinah*. No terror, no fire of judgment. There was no instant death for this one who not only looked upon God, but gazed deeply into God’s eyes. In that stable in Bethlehem, Mary — the most-favored one — was permitted to do something no High Priest of Israel had ever done. She held God in her arms, and tenderly kissed him on the forehead.

This baby changes everything: not only for his parents, but for the whole human race. The birth of Jesus changes the religion game completely, because — hearing this lovely story — you and I can realize once again, or maybe even understand for the first time, that God’s deepest desire for us is that we enter the place of holiness not through the portal of fear, but by the portal of love.

That same Jesus is calling you this day, as ever he does: calling you to himself. Calling you into deeper relationship with him. Everything about the life you’ve been living that is bitter or ugly or broken or shameful you can lay at his feet. Such burdens you need carry no longer: he will carry them for you. There is no anger, no judgment before his manger-bed. There is only grace and acceptance and love.

**Thus rejoicing,
free from sorrow,
praises voicing
greet the morrow:
Christ the babe was born for you!
Christ the babe was born for you!**

Let’s sing the words of that beloved carol, as our personal act of praise and adoration!

Copyright © 2019 by Carlos E. Wilton. All rights reserved.