

Sermon for 12/24/11
Christmas Eve 6 p.m. Eucharist

Here's something I've probably done more often than you have: visited moms in the hospital shortly after they gave birth.

It's just one of the perks of being a priest.

I get to tiptoe into the room, say a prayer, and share in a family's joy.

My prayer is almost always one about hope for the future and wisdom and strength for the parents.

It never fails to put me in mind of the birth of my own children, the joy that I felt then, and the joy they continue to bring to my life.

And as the children that I've visited grow, I love to look at them and think, "I held you or I blessed you when you were only a few hours old."

I think that gives me a little different perspective as to why we like the story of Jesus' birth in the manger so much.

That story puts us in mind of that special time of hope and possibility that comes along with the birth of a baby.

Just as the story of the birth of our own children may get told over and over again, we love to hear the story of Jesus' birth year after year.

That's why the Christmas pageant is such an important part of our Christmas services each year.

That's why the crèche is such a popular symbol of the Christmas season.

And we feel that special spirit of Christmas when we hear the story of Jesus' birth.

We feel it when we hear the angels' proclamation of the glory of God and the gift of peace on earth.

We feel it when we gaze on a manger scene and our voices become somewhat hushed because, after all, we don't want to wake the baby.

That Christmas spirit fills us with a sense of peaceful hopefulness that is similar to the sense of peace and hope that accompanies the birth of just about any child.

But we have to remember that there is another way of looking at the story of Jesus' birth.

He was born to refugees who had been driven from their homes because of an arbitrary political reason.

The only place they could find for Mary to deliver her child was in a filthy barn

Instead of being attended to by a loving family and a midwife, Jesus' first few hours were spent surrounded by the stench of farm animals.

Finally, although scripture is silent on the matter, we can only guess how difficult it must have been for Mary, Joseph, and their newborn son to journey back home once the census had been taken.

Jesus was born into a life of struggle and oppression; he was a refugee at birth and he lived his entire life as a person in an occupied country.

If we're honest, we have to admit that his birth was really not all that different from the births of many poor people throughout the world today.

Of course we would much rather focus on the story of the Holy Family surrounded by angels and voices from heaven, but the reality of the situation is a powerful reminder of the difficult lives that some people must lead.

So which is the true Christmas story?

Is it the one about the Holy Family and the angels or the one about the refugees struggling to stay alive?

And, of course, the answer is that both of them are true.

The birth of Jesus Christ *was* a glorious event that transformed the world.

The vast chasm between God and us was bridged by the God made man, Jesus of Nazareth, the baby born in a manger in Bethlehem.

Because of that wondrous birth, God is no longer distant and remote, beyond our experience and understanding.

No, God is here; God is with us; God's love is directly in our midst, so close that we can even touch God's presence in the form of bread and wine.

The work that was accomplished through that holy birth that we celebrate tonight WAS glorious, yet the physical details surrounding that birth were more difficult, more perilous, and more squalid than we can easily imagine.

*The Rev. Kent D. Rahm
Trinity Episcopal Church, Fredericksburg, VA
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Our challenge is to live into both of the messages that we receive about the birth of our savior, to live into both the holiness and the squalor.

Right now, it really is our responsibility to celebrate Christmas, to make merry, to rejoice in all that God has done for us.

We *should* embrace the Christmas spirit; this season is one that should feel different as it brings us into the hope and the promise of birth.

And then beginning Monday, after we've had a good opportunity to rejoice and to celebrate, it will be time for us to remember that the world is far more complex and far more difficult than we really want it to be.

Starting on Monday we again need to pay attention to the homeless and the poor children who are neglected and ignored throughout their lives, the ones for whom the spirit of Christmas feels just as impossible as ever feeling truly loved.

Starting on Monday we again need to pay attention to the people who can't get enough to eat because their low income means that they can't buy food or even get to the places where food is being given away.

We need to remember the people of Iraq as they face the renewed violence that was sure to come no matter when the American forces withdrew.

We need to remember the Christians in Sudan whose lives are threatened by anti-Christian fervor and a shortage of food that is both political and environmental.

We need to remember the people of the nations in the European Union who are being forced into austerity budgets and who no longer have the benefits that they had come to rely on.

We need to remember the poor in Honduras whose nation has become so dangerous that the Peace Corps has to pull out.

We need to remember the Americans who are out of work with few opportunities for employment.

We need to remember all the people throughout the world whose lives are continually buffeted by forces beyond their control, leaving them feeling lost, helpless, and afraid.

The message of the baby born in Bethlehem combines our own joy with our need to be aware of and to respond to the poverty and the desperate lives of other people.

But we are blessed.

We are blessed to know the good news for ourselves.

We are blessed to be part of the church, the community that celebrates the glorious truth that God's love is in our midst, that God is with us in the person of Jesus Christ.

Let us be so moved by the joy of Christmas that we may receive the gifts of strength, motivation, and commitment so that we may spread the benefits of Jesus' birth to more and more people.

To us is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.

And let us make it our Christmas prayer that next year, even more people will share in our celebration of this glorious night.

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