

WHAT ELSE IS BEING BORN HERE TODAY?

An old saint once told me that I should preach every sermon as if it were my last. And that I should further realize that many people were praying that it *would* be my last. I am finally coming to the place where I can preach with both of these thoughts in mind and not be much distracted by either one of them. So I, for one, am very glad to be here. Very glad I get to preach one more time. I, of course, always wish the sermon could be better. It always starts out to be, but somewhere between conception and completion, things ooze away and it ends up mere words. And preaching is not the only illustration of this pattern. Yet even that doesn't seem nearly as important as it used to seem. Good sermons, after all, come more from the ears that hear them, than from the mouths that preach them. Some people never figure that out.

Above, beyond, and behind all the details: We celebrate a birthday here today. We celebrate a life that was born into our world – a child who grew up to change our world. At least for many of us, Jesus has changed everything we know, expect, or care about in this world. Some things which we cared about before, we care about more now. Some things which we thought were really important before do not seem so important anymore. Some things which had never occurred to us before He came seem obvious and huge to us now.

How can we celebrate such a birth, such a Person, such a mind-altering, life-changing event? Obviously whatever we say or do will be inadequate to the task. Whatever we say or do will seem to us like mere mumbling and fumbling in comparison to the real significance of this Person. Even the “Hallelujah Chorus” will only make a stab in the right direction. And on top of it all, this Person – this Great One – truly and deeply loves us. We don't mean in some vague generality – some generalized principle of niceness or good will or generic well-wishing, like the Christmas cards imply. This Great One loves each one of us specifically, individually, personally ... and with all the passion and caring and focus and attention with which any of *us* can love even our own beings. This One put His life on the line for us. This One holds our lives in His heart and in His hands, even when He goes into the presence of the numinous God. This is the birthday of the One we celebrate. At least it is if we have any understanding, gratitude, or awareness of why we are gathering, what we are celebrating, or what it is really about. *Unto us a child is born.*

That does not really tell us much unless we know the rest of the story. And we do know the rest of the story. So this is our Christmas, and today we celebrate His birth.

Of course, some of us do care about the details too. I run into more and more people who don't really care who this child is or was. It matters to me that it was Jesus of Nazareth. They tell me that all the details are insignificant; only the spiritual truth in general really matters; it doesn't make any difference whether it was Siddhartha or Muhammad or some manifestation of Krishna. Who cares if it was real – or just a poem being written or a principle being invented – as long as we get the spiritual “fix” we need and are looking for? None of us, they say, are really that spiritually alive or evolved or awake to know the difference. The Gos-pill is only a drug we take to help us make it through the night. We will wake up in January and go on with our challenges and our struggles, and look back and realize that the respite was a blessed moment of reprieve – a pleasant interlude. Perhaps it will even help us to stumble along a little better for a little while longer.

Except Jesus of Nazareth is not a figment of our imagination. This child really was born into our world. Our world has fought Him – and all the Light He brings us – with increasing desperation through all the years. From time to time His Light overtakes one or another of us. And sure enough, it slays us. In profound, if incomplete, ways, we die to this world. And what nobody can see from the outside is that we are raised to New LIFE – New Ways – New Purposes. So you will never convince or persuade one of the “newborn” that this is generic, vague, or some sweet euphemism smeared over the outer veneer of our alienation and despair. His birth was real, and so was His life. So was His death and resurrection – *and* His return as the Holy Spirit. So the details do matter, both His and ours!

One of the problems on the inside of the church – and if you are in *The New Church*, you need to know it and not run from it – is that somewhere in the second and third centuries, people started wondering and worrying about whether Jesus was special enough to save us. The solution, some thought, was for us to “make Him special” – instead of just letting Him *be* special. We are always trying to be helpful, but sometimes we mess things up when we are afraid or doubtful or insecure. Making things up or inventing things to buttress the truth we are afraid may be sagging is dangerous in ways we do not realize at the time. We think we

understand, but in fact we only see a small part of the true and larger picture. However good our intentions, if we try to fix the part of the picture that we see – with inventions, stories, or claims that are not really true – they often end up being glaring errors worse than what we were trying to fix.

How many times have we created an ecological horror story by introducing a species to take care of the one problem we were seeing? I just returned from New Zealand. They are still trying to kill off some of the critters they once thought would solve some of their problems, but the damn things breed faster than they can kill them. It's like some of our theological constructs. They end up causing tenfold the number of problems we thought they would solve. The birth narratives of Jesus and the fourth-century creeds of the church are just such horror stories. At the time, and from the perspective of human knowledge at the time, people thought they were defending the faith and plugging up all the holes of doubt that anybody could ever think of or have. But they saw only a small part of the larger picture, and created greater problems than the ones they thought they were fixing. Now you cannot sing a carol or put up a Christmas decoration without finding possums and cats and other critters running everywhere.

Jesus really was born into our world – as one of us. The mystery of the Incarnation is endlessly incredible. It opens up dimensions and possibilities and wonders and evidence for God's love that truly never end. But with too much help from us, it degenerates into superstition and very limited notions of what a great miracle should be like, until the true grandeur is lost and the impact on real life (and real people like us) is sidetracked and cut back to pathetic and irrelevant little sideshows. For instance, being born of a virgin breaks the connection with our planet and with people like us. The true Incarnation is a far greater and truer story. Likewise, "very God of very God" leaves very little room for THE MAN who truly reconciles us to God.

We celebrate His birthday, and the truth is that Jesus really did have a mother. Why is Christmas not also a truer, deeper, far greater celebration of "Mother's Day" than we have ever known? Which is greater: virginity or motherhood? Apart from motherhood, virginity has no value or meaning. I did know Mariana when she was a virgin. For years now, she has become far more and far greater than that. She is a wife and a mother. Is anyone so brain-dead or heart-mangled that they would

imagine I could honor or love Mariana more for being a virgin than for being a wife and mother? Virginity is only valuable as a prelude to motherhood; if there is no motherhood, all of its value is lost.

I know; this is too complex for some people to follow, especially on Christmas. I and others have written much about the topic, for anybody who really wants to understand. Nevertheless, the union of Joseph and Mary – the establishment of covenant love bonds and family life into which Jesus was born, and apart from which survival is unlikely (if even possible) for our kind – why doesn't Christmas celebrate that?! And lift up the sacred participation of real people with the real God – in all the struggles, challenges, and true devotion of family love, parental love, married love? In a great many places, we are losing the awareness of such things. And when it is gone, all will be lost, at least for a while. When it is gone, the sterile statues of the Virgin Mary all over the globe will not save us. There really is a difference between faith and superstition – between miracles and magic. Jesus will still save us. But He does not save us with superstition or magic. He saves us by reconciling us to God.

Well, all is not lost yet. *Unto us a child is born.* And in a few short years, it became more and more clear to an ever-increasing few that, in this special life, many threads were being drawn together from all the religious experiences and encounters and awakenings of two thousand years of Judaism, and before. All life was becoming more special, more sacred, more intentional and purposeful than we had ever known before. Not easier! Maybe in some ways even harder. But filled with meaning, significance, a future – one we had never fully seen before. And not for everyone. Well, for everyone, but not everyone wants it, or wants to see it, know it, or live for it. But for many of us, it is almost like seeing through new eyes and with new understanding. For *“Behold, I am making all things new.”* (Revelation 21:5)

My real question this morning is: What else is being born here today? That is a real reduction, many will say. That is trying to drag high truth down to our levels, our realities, our possibilities. How offensive. How sad to reduce all the majesty and glory and wonder and mystery of a Christmas celebration down to our level.

Indeed it is. Yet I doubt if Jesus would be offended by the thought that His life was making a difference to our lives. From His perspective, that may even be connected to why He really came. In any case, I ask you:

WHAT ELSE IS BEING BORN HERE TODAY?

What else is being born here today? What else is being born – because He was born?

Today I celebrate the birth of new hope. It is not entirely new, since different people come alive to it at different times. Yet it *is* new, since it keeps opening up new levels for us. I used to think my personality and its attributes were set in stone and could never change. Perhaps I took some pride in that, in ways I didn't even realize, since now I am surprised to realize I am happier, more flexible, more optimistic than I was in former days. It is still Jesus making the changes. I am not as locked-in to my old Scorpio stances as I used to be. The people I know and love are more resilient, more wonderful, more full of promise than I ever realized before. The Spirit is at work in their lives even more than I ever dared to hope. They are in pilgrimage, growing and learning. They understand the mysteries and possibilities of "faith" enough to demonstrate them, and to share them with me.

I discover that I am far from the only one who cares about the deep things of the Christian Faith. It used to feel like I was nearly alone in such things, except for some of my heroes from the past. Today those around me seem to be more aware, deeper and more sincere, than I ever believed or realized in former years. And yes, I blame and bless Jesus. No other power and no other love I know about would care about bringing such developments. So it builds. And if it keeps growing, it might even change the nature or flavor of some of our churches, even some of our denominations. Not counting chickens, you understand, but watching and waiting, as we say. Speaking of such relationships, I even realize that my own marriage is not like it used to be. It is far better than I ever expected it to be. How scary is it to admit that?

Poor words, and they only hint at some of the new hope in my life. But old as I am, things keep changing. There are new levels of awareness, and of purpose. I feel less rigid and more open to joy and promise, even in the world around me.

Today I celebrate the birth of *The New Church*. In a few theoretical ways, I *had* thought of it, but mostly I did not see it coming. If I had, I would not have been off trying to find a call to another traditional parish. Several of you may even remember conversations with me a few years ago, when I was claiming to be waiting for what the Spirit had in store for me next. But underneath, I was wondering if there really was more to come. Maybe I was too old – well, that is for sure, but I mean too old for the

Spirit to care what I did any longer. Were there really any new possibilities, any new challenges I could be part of? Those questions all seem answered now. Oh, not solved, not finished, and not over and done with. But I do celebrate the birth of *The New Church*, and look forward to how it will unfold from here. Beyond that, I am aware that there is more “pleasure” (if that’s the right word) and less anxiety or pressure than I have known in any former parish. Does that mean I do not care whether we survive or thrive? In some ways, I suppose that’s true. But I do care – greatly – that we survive and thrive as an intentional faith family in love with and in service to our Lord. And that is something born this day that could not, by any stretch of the imagination, have been born if Jesus had not been born.

Today I celebrate the birth of new and changing convictions. This is not something I own personally, or something I think only applies to me. Nor is it brand new, in that nobody has seen it or worked for it until now. But it feels to me like God is bringing a new era into being. At first I thought it might be only a passing fancy on the part of a few. And it comes with much confusion and no small amount of detriment and falseness, along with the new doors opening. But God is working hard, it seems to me, to break open some doors and windows in this world’s religious structures. More people are talking, with genuine interest and openness, across the barriers of prejudice and mistrust that have long divided the religious people of our time. That may be something too soon to celebrate, yet it does seem clear that something new is being born in the hearts and minds of many religious people.

And God is working hard to raise the level of awareness and caring of people everywhere toward a far greater level of nurture and protectiveness toward our planet. God is working hard to save some of the plants and animals of our world. I think of the number of organizations and associations and the amount of money and time being spent on ecological concerns when I was a boy, in comparison to what is going on now. Clearly there is a major reformation going on. Not all of it, of course, is consciously religious. Not all of it is wise or sincere either. Yet the source of the concern is indeed religious – in its temperament, in its fervor, and in its origin.

You would greatly misunderstand if you thought I was claiming that any of our problems are over. Yet God is at work. And the Spirit of our Lord Jesus Christ is inspiring much of it – and many of us – toward

a greater regard for all humans everywhere. It is still not what we might all hope and pray it should be. It is not what most of us believe it will be in the next realms. Yet it is still better to be a woman today than it was fifty years ago. It is better to be a gay person today than it was fifty years ago. It is better to be almost any kind of person – from any race, color, nationality, physical ailment, echelon of society – than it was fifty years ago. In some ways, this only cuts things back to more fundamental problems: integrity, responsibility, purpose, gratitude, allegiance. Those are maybe harder but better battles than humanly contrived injustice or cruelty.

God is working. New things are being born into our world. Yet I am not celebrating the demise of Satan. Nor do I have any confidence that there is gain without loss in our broken world. Yet less and less do I see any of it apart from or disconnected from the story of Jesus. His Holy Spirit is at work everywhere. The strife is always there, as it was in His life too. Energies and forces work against every breakthrough – against every effort to bring joy, peace, prosperity, or freedom. But many are at work in our time to bring cleaner water; to bring safer, less expensive energy; to bring better health; to heal and improve relationships; to renew schools, churches, companies, and even governments. Even in our own tiny fellowship, there are those who see and care and strive for such things.

I find myself far more grateful to be here than I ever was before. Yet I am still more grateful than ever that soon, from the human perspective, we get to move on. All things have a better destination than we ever dreamed before He came. Our future is ever brighter because of Jesus. Many things are still being born – because He was born. Many things are even being reborn – because He was born.

Sometimes we can only return to waiting and watching. But He leads us on, those of us who are willing to follow Him. So there is a strange kind of peace and joy for us, even in the midst of all the strife. We are so grateful and blessed that we get to celebrate Christmas. *Unto us a child is born.* And because He was born, many other things, large and small, are being born into this world. A very Merry Christmas to each one of you. And Happy Birthday, Jesus.