

Christmas Eve
December 24th, 2008

Episcopal Church of Our Saviour
Mill Valley, California

A New Thing
The Rev. Richard E. Helmer

I don't have to tell you, Christmas this year comes in the midst of gathering gloom. We are no longer shocked by the bad economic news that appears in the headlines day after day. We've been in it too long now to pause long at Christmastime as monthly unemployment figures today quite merrily paraded their worst in decades. Even in our relatively sheltered communities of Mill Valley and the greater Bay Area, people are in conversation about struggling between jobs or nervous about whether the next few weeks or months will see them out of work. Finances are strained, home values continue to drop, and the government talks in terms of hundreds of billions of dollars of borrowed time and money to the ailing economy, and yet the situation remains the same for so many – and many who are struggling even harder for basics like food, shelter, or healthcare. We might take some solace that we are not in as hard a situation as our sisters and brothers in, say, Zimbabwe or Afghanistan, and yet we are unsettled that our fate is more closely and inexorably related with theirs than we once thought.

Whatever story you bring with you this night and hold in your hearts and prayers, it is probably connected one way or another with our failing global economy and the growing uncertainty about what 2009 will bring. The stories of the greater world are all laid bare this night before us, alongside our own personal stories, and this peculiar story we hear again re-told as we have in Christmases past, year after year.

The question of the story we hear each Christmas is both a question of narrative – that is, of story – and a question of theology – that is, a question about who God is. And the question boils down to simply this: Why did God choose to engage the human family in this way and not another?

For centuries before Mary and Joseph, peoples the world over had been telling stories about God or gods relating to the human family. Gods who dwelt in the sky, on mountain tops or beneath the earth or in the capricious forces of nature – gods who were constantly cajoling and demanding attention, satiation, and obedience from their human subjects. Even the religious tradition into which Jesus is born carries in its scriptures the tribal understandings of a God who flooded the known world when he tired of human corruption. A God who appeared to Moses in the burning bush and claimed a particular people as his own, rescuing them with plagues and portents from their oppressors, leading them by miracles and columns of smoke and punishing them when they misbehaved. A God who descended like the fire gods and volcanic spirits on a mountaintop to deliver the Law. A God who occupied a temple in a particular place and a particular time, demanded sacrifice, and anointed leaders over his people. A God whose story was writ large and dramatic, just like those old Charlton Heston films. Where God made history like a great warrior or a triumphant politician or a hero of old.

Only later, while in exile and without a temple, would the ancient Israelites come to fully recognize that a heroic tribal god without a home was effectively useless. The true God of their ancestors and the God speaking

through the prophets was One who transcended tribe, time, and place and promised something new for a world and a vulnerable people often broken by warfare, natural disaster, and political corruption. And this truer God had designs for the human family, One who transcended the comfortable containers of tribe and place, and yet One who refused the well-worn paths of popularity and military might.

Luke opens the story of Jesus' birth with mention of the Roman Empire's expanded power of the first century – the Emperor Augustus has declared a registration be taken. Augustus was easily one of the most powerful men who ever lived – among the most successful of emperors – his divinity was declared by the senate following his death, the reach of his military and economic might almost incalculable. His success reached forward across centuries.

The registration Luke mentions was Augustus doing what sensible rulers of empire had always done: consolidate power, re-trench bureaucracy, re-finance the vast imperial machine. God might well have chosen Augustus as a more shrewd and accomplished candidate for Messiah – indeed some of his contemporaries and even those first hearing these words from Luke thought Augustus might indeed have been the Messiah.

But Luke is subtly or not so subtly reminding us that Caesar Augustus, while successful in so many ways in establishing the *pax romana*, was at his best like any other great ruler or old tribal god reaching down from the sky or the mountaintop or the imperial capital to inflict his designs on the teeming masses—disconnected in most ways from the everyday folk who constitute the vast part of the human family throughout history, oblivious to their stories of the daily grind, the joys and sufferings of a people eking out a quiet living – oblivious most certainly to a small town in Galilee called Nazareth; utterly blind to an uncertain couple named Mary and Joseph.

That the God of the Universe should choose them to start something new is both counter-intuitive and unsettling. Counter-intuitive because Mary and Joseph offered the baby Jesus no real clout to wield. Joseph might have been descended from the House of David, but who wasn't? He was a carpenter – no more than that. And, anyway, David's line had long since been replaced by a series of puppet kings under the Roman thumb. Mary offered little but a willingness to listen to angels and accept a most ridiculous proposal that she carry in her womb King David's heir, the Prince of Peace, the Child of the Most High God. Whether she confided this to anyone beyond her most intimate kin is doubtful. Who would have believed her? And that she conceived this child, as the story says, without Joseph's help and the benefits of wedlock means she was liable to become an object of public scandal. The promised Messiah was getting no political or social help from his parents – that's for sure. Even in the twenty-first century, children born in such circumstances would not be expected to amount to much.

And this story ought to unsettle us because in our time, as we wrestle with the throes of economic crisis and wave after wave of gloom and doom – as we do this, we are reminded that our true salvation is not in the hands of the powerful. In less than a month, a new presidential administration takes office, and as much as we might celebrate or dread that moment, we cannot expect President Obama to reach down any better than an ancient sky-god or a shrewd emperor to solve our day-to-day challenges – any more than Emperor Augustus could in the first century for a couple from Nazareth.

No, instead, this Christmas, we are offered a most unlikely gift for troubled times – God born among us and with us in the midst of our struggles and challenges. A God who cries in the night for food and warmth – to be held –

as we wonder how the bills will get paid this year, this month, or even this week, or where the next paycheck is coming from. A God who is turned away from even simple lodging and is birthed amongst the animals and grime of a stable. A God who experiences our setbacks and worries as much as our nearest and dearest kin.

We might have wanted a God who was going to throw thunderbolts from the sky or perhaps descend upon Mount Tam in a column of smoke. Perhaps a God who would sweep away all our problems along with our enemies or guard us and our treasures safe with legions of well-armed soldiers. Maybe a God who would dispense a new economic model or a financial rescue plan that works, and works quickly. But what we get is a baby, born of a poor mother vulnerable to gossip and married to a bewildered man who can't even afford to buy his family's way into some decent inn while they're on the road.

The message of Christmas, of incarnation, of God not only with us but one of us, is a message that God is doing something new. And this new thing is not simply an artifact of history confined to a dusty first-century village in Palestine, but is ongoing, everywhere, and forever. That means that God is already doing a new a thing among us during these hard times, even while the government is bumbling about in its usual bureaucratic ways, even while we wait for the reins of power to change hands – hopefully for the better. And this new thing is new life, every bit as amazing and precious as a newborn child. In fact, this new thing *is* a child born for us.

Christmas means that God belongs to *us*, in all of our peculiarities and strange and unique stories, and cannot be bought by princes, presidents, or pundits. That means that God is close at hand when we risk being overcome by anxiety, when we risk being consumed by our struggle to work through all the challenges that this time of year, this time in our lives, this time in our history brings. It's the kind of good news that the shepherds received – good news for the world that would be forever changed by the new and the unlikely. That God's power rested ultimately with the downtrodden, forgotten, and lost, rather than the self-important and influential. That God lives with the unemployed, the underemployed, and the hungry and the worried and the concerned in our day. That their stories, like our stories, matter to God, and God is woven right into the heart of them, just as God finds a way into our hearts this time of year in the tender, fragile, and needy gaze of a little baby. And our hopes and lives will grow a new with this little child.

So are you ready for this new and unlikely news of God with us? Take heart. Mary and Joseph really weren't, either. Yet, here we are, twenty centuries later welcoming this little child, this kernel of hope, this flicker of light in our darkness, with song and prayer. And seeing in him, at last, the satisfaction of the longings we all carry. For our struggles belong to him, along with the rest of our lives in all their rough and tumble. And Christ has come to remake it all anew, from beginning to end, for a love that was before time, for a God who is God of the present, past, and the future; for a God of the skies and the seas and the land; for a God for each of us and everything that we are, down to our very last breath.