

Christmas Eve (Late) Day, 24-25 December, 2009  
Isaiah 52:7-10; Ps 98  
Heb 1:1-4; John 1:1-14

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The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. (John 1:5)

In the 2007 film *Juno*, a young girl finds herself pregnant and has to face all the difficult choices that entails in our world. Juno decides to have the child, braving the reactions of the other kids at her high school, braving (even worse!) the reactions of her father and stepmother, and then to put the baby up for adoption. She screens potential parents carefully, settling on a couple named the Loring -- a pair of yuppies, far wealthier than Juno's own family, who have good jobs and artsy interests and a beautiful home and a warm relationship -- and who are desperate to have a child. In short, Juno tries to offer her child a perfect home -- the one she cannot give it as an unwed teenager, the one (we sense) she may have wished she had herself.

It all goes well, until the Loring decide to get a divorce. The news rocks Juno's world. She had been counting on the fact that her baby would have a perfect life -- the right toys, the right schools, the coolest parents -- a child's fantasy of what life should be. Even with her pregnancy, even with all the choices she has had to make, Juno has remained essentially a child until this moment -- the moment she faces the hard truth that there is no perfect world. To have a child, to be a parent, means bringing that new life into great uncertainty, entrusting the baby to people who fail one another, with no guarantees that there will be more sunshine than sorrow along the way. To bear a child, to be a human being, is to live beyond our means, wrestling with the angel to shape a life out of the cold shadows and searing passions of the world. It is to accept imperfection as the only way we know, the only life we have, the only life we can live.

That's why the nativity story rings so true for me. In spite of (or perhaps because of) all its miracles -- the annunciation to John the Baptist's father Zechariah, the annunciation to Mary, the miraculous conception, the star, Joseph's dream -- this is a story which is true to human experience. The young mother, unwed, afraid, hustling to another town where an older relative might help her hide her swollen belly; the unexpected grace of welcome; the bewildered fiancé who wants to put her away quietly; the inconvenience of the census, the muddy roads and overcrowded inns -- these are things which happen every day, and no one remarks on them. Every day, poor women lay their babies in dresser drawers because there is no cradle. Every day, kind-hearted step-parents tenderly raise children not their own. Every day, foreclosures and evictions force pregnant women to leave home, their few things in a bag, with no clear idea where they will spend the evening. It is all so *real*, so *us*.

You might have thought God would have been able to do better, but that is not the issue. God *could* have done -- not better, but other. God could have caused Jesus to be born to the Emperor, to grow up in luxury, not to have had to work or worry about food or care for the sick. God could have done better, but many of us could not -- and that was the point. Since we could not be with God, God chose to be with us. Since we could not be like God, God chose to be like us -- not just *like* us, as if he were some kind of hero pretending to be normal, but *really* like us, one of us in every way, sharing our limitations and our confusion and our pain. There was no better way, because only in coming among the least of us could Christ offer a way back to God for even the least of us. The issue was not God's limitations, but ours.

So many people waste their energy struggling with the idea of the Virgin Birth: "It's not scientific," they say. "It's not possible." "It's not believable." And they are right: it's not normal. But friends, if you're speaking of the birth of Christ, that's *not* the miracle! The *real* miracle, the Miracle

with a capital M, is that God would love us enough to want to be with us; that God would care enough about the struggles of creation to share them; that God would respond to our constant chorus of "no" with God's own resounding and everlasting "yes." And compared to *that*, compared to the love of a God who will not give up and will not despair and will not turn away, all the rest of it -- angels and stars and miracles all -- is small potatoes, mere details not worth the quibble. God's love for us is the thing; the rest is footnotes.

I think that, in our hearts, we know that. That is why we are gathered here tonight: to tell the story, to sing the old songs, to be reminded of the eternal grace of God all compressed into a baby's sleeping face, and to kneel in awe where our fathers and mothers have knelt, our knees pressing into the snowy dimples first made by angels and shepherds and kings. We come here to be renewed in hope, to see once more that there is no harm which God cannot redeem, no guilt which God cannot wash away, no place we can go where we are beyond the reach of God. On this most holy night, God opens with God's own flesh "the path toward God for men and the way of God into the soul" (St. Macarius) On this most holy night, we behold the light which our darkness can not overcome: it shines on us and transfigures this darkened world into the dwelling-place of glory.

Five hundred years before Christ was born, the prophet Zechariah proclaimed: "Whoever has despised the day of small things shall rejoice." (Zech 4:10) But today we celebrate the day of small things, the day of small people, not because small things are all we can do, but because we know and see that God uses them to show us God's love. And you -- if you feel that you are insignificant, know that you matter greatly in the heart of God. If you feel that you are broken, know that there is healing in the hands of God. If you are imperfect, if you have failed, if you sometimes walk in darkness, know that that is the world God has given us, and it is the world God chose to enter because he loves you. You are loved beyond your wildest imagination. You are loved beyond choirs of angels and sudden stars and the slow turning of galaxies. All these, God laid aside when he was born this night. But you: YOU are what God has been seeking all along.

Have a blessed, blessed Christmas!