

“Sing, sing, sing to the Lord a new song.  
Let heaven and nature... Sing!”  
AMEN!

On this night when there's not much  
stirring and the stockings are hung.

A night when children will eventually  
be nestled into their beds and parents  
will breathe a sigh of relief, hopefully.

I say hopefully because there might be  
some assembly still required on certain gifts,

there might be last minute wrapping still to do,  
and there's that worry about the credit card bill  
that will come around mid-January.

Those things are anything but feelings of relief.

Yet, so many of us wish to make the  
Christmas morning magical and that means  
we think we need to spend lots of money  
on things for people we love.

I've been known to go against my better judgment  
in order to relive the magic of Christmas  
in the children's eyes, haven't you?  
Tonight is kind of like believing in something

that is opposite to our better judgment.

So, indulge me a moment to play the “Grinch” tonight.

No, I won’t steal Christmas, but  
    isn’t it against our better judgment  
        to understand that God came to us in a child...  
        a baby of all things.

Could God do it? Sure, I suppose.

Could God come to us as a child? Of course!

We just can’t believe that God actually did.

See, we are trained to not consider this miracle  
    for what it really means.

We, instead, focus on the sentimentality  
    of the little baby God.

Who among us does not tear up a little  
    when one of the little shepherd children  
        scoop up the baby doll Jesus and hold him  
        high in the air?

Like a cuddly lion king.

We whisper, “How lovely!”

Cute and sweet, even though there’s no record of

that in the gospel text, but we love it.

Even though, nowhere does a shepherd  
scoop up Jesus for a lift.

Just like there's no record of a little drummer boy  
coming to play after a woman gave birth in a stable  
outside of town.

Talk about inappropriate! :-)

So, what is the right message for us?

If it is not a soft, sweet baby God, then what is it?

Well, the right message is about a fierce,  
intense, alarming devotion of God  
to be with us.

The real message on this night of  
Christmas celebration is God's eager pursuit  
of humankind.

An answer to our worry about being left abandoned.

A reminder that, though politicians and tyrants  
threaten us, we will not be left in that darkness  
and danger alone because somehow, someway,

God has broken into our world and into our lives.

And when the angel came to Mary,  
to tell her that she'd have a child,  
Emmanuel, which means "God with us."

That announcement tell us what this night is really about.

Sure, we'll speak of babies and mangers,  
but tonight is really about a colossal desire on  
God's part to "be with us."

To be a part of our human condition,  
even experience it firsthand and know  
what it feels like to be disappointed,  
scared, empty, hungry, cold.

To feel emotions of fractured relationships, and  
meet us in our difficulties of addiction.

To be with us as our world's turned  
upside down by things and people.

In all of this, the Christmas message is that God  
won't let us be left alone, and that

reaches out to you and me, as a  
passionate lover reaches out to their beloved.

But even this seems to go against our  
better judgment because sometimes it feels  
like we don't deserve this much love  
and that much presence. (Pause)

So, if you will, let me retell a story to you  
that was told by a priest.

Father William Bosch's story mentions a baby  
"because it was told by a woman,

the baby's mother,

but the point of the story lies far beyond the baby.

It tells of God's passion for us.

Here is the mother's true story:

It was Sunday, Christmas Day.

Our family had spent a holiday in San Francisco  
with my husband's parents, but in order for us  
to be back to work on Monday,  
we found ourselves driving the 400 miles  
back home to Los Angeles on  
Christmas Day.

We stopped for lunch in King City.

The restaurant was nearly empty.

We were the only family and ours were the only children.

I heard Erik, my one year old squeal with glee.

“Hithere,” the two words he always  
thought were one.

“Hithere,” and for emphasis he’d pound  
his fat baby hands.

Whack, whack, whack - on the metal high chair.

His face was alive with excitement,  
his eyes bright and wide, gums bared  
in a toothless smile.

He wriggled and giggled, and then I saw  
the source of his merriment.

I saw why he was so happy...

And my eyes could not take it all in at once.

A tattered rag of a coat, obviously bought  
by someone else years ago,

but now it was dirty, greasy, and torn;

baggy pants covering a spindly body;

toes exposed from what used to be called shoes;

a shirt that had ring-around-the- collar all over it;

and a face like no other-gums as bare as Erik's.

“Hi there, baby. Hi there, big guy,  
I see you Buster.”

My husband and I exchanged a look that was  
a cross between “What do we do” and “Poor fella.”

Our meal came and the banging and noise  
continued as our child could not take his eyes off  
the old bum who himself was now shouting  
across the room,

“Do you know patty cake? Atta boy.

What about peek-a-boo?

Hey, you do know peek-a-boo!  
Look at you! Smart!”

Erik continued to laugh and call out, “Hithere!”

And each call was answered.

No one thought it was cute.

The guy was a drunk and a disturbance.

I was embarrassed.

My husband, Dennis, was humiliated.

Even our six year old was asking,  
“Why is that old man talking so loud?”

We finished lunch and Dennis took our 6 year old and  
went to pay the check, imploring me to take Erik  
and meet him in the parking lot.

“Lord, just let me get out of here before  
he speaks to me or Erik,” I prayed and  
I bolted for the door.

It soon became apparent though  
that the Lord, and Erik,  
had other plans.

As I drew near the man,  
I turned my back to him to side step him and  
held my breath to not take in any air that  
he might be breathing.

And as I did, Erik, all the while with his eyes riveted  
to his new best friend, leaned over my arm,  
reaching with both of his  
to a baby’s pick-me-up position.

In a split second of balancing my baby and  
turning to counter my child’s pull,  
I came eye to eye with the old man.

Erik was lunging for him,



arms spread wide.

The bum's eyes both asked and implored,  
"Would you let me hold your baby?"

There was no need for me to answer  
since Erik propelled himself from my arms  
into the arms of the man.

Suddenly a very old man and  
a very young child  
made a loving embrace.

Erik laid his tiny head on the man's ragged shoulder.

The man's eyes closed and I saw tears hover  
beneath his lashes.

His aged hands, full of grime and pain and hard labor,  
gently, so gently, cradled my baby's bottom  
and stroked his back.

I stood there awestruck.

The man rocked and cradled Erik in  
his arms for a moment, and then his eyes  
opened and set squarely on mine.

He said, in a firm and commanding voice,  
"You take care of this baby."

And somehow I managed to choke out, “I will,”  
from a throat that contained a stone.

He gently pried an unwilling Erik from his chest,  
unwillingly, and longingly, as though he was in  
pain.

I held my arms to receive my baby, and  
again the gentleman addressed me:

God bless you M’am.

You’ve given me my Christmas gift.”

I said nothing more than a muttered, “thanks.”

With Erik in my arms I ran for the car.

Dennis wondered why I was crying and  
holding Erik so tightly.

And wondering why I was saying,  
“My God, forgive me. Forgive me.” (Pause)

Let me suggest that this is the Christmas magic  
we live and relive tonight.

Erik is the meaning of Christmas and Erik is Christmas.

The embrace experienced is God,  
and Erik is God’s arms,

God's zeal to be with us.

Might I also suggest that we are the tattered bums,  
with broken lives and shattered relationships,  
and chronic pains from selfish sins.

But then something breaks in,  
like two little arms that are determined  
to break into our lives.

We long to feel the loving embrace.

Erik, like Jesus, was a fierce little baby  
who made no distinctions but embraced  
the least among us.

It's what Christmas is all about.

An unrelenting kind of love that both  
enlivens and paralyzes us.

A love that beckons us to sing and  
chokes us up at the same time.

A love that is not sentimentality.  
A love that is not soft.

It is dangerous, rough, passionate, unrelenting.

It is God's desire to be with us and  
it's what this night is all about. (Pause)

If we are left alone and God did not embrace us  
and enter our shattered lives,  
then woe unto us.

There is only hope in humankind and  
that hope is fleeting,

for without the light of God there is only  
darkness and despair.

Without God with us, we are here tonight  
because of routine, empty sentimentality,  
and false hope.

But, if you are here because of love and  
here because, like the ragtag group of shepherds  
you came to kneel and rejoice then  
we just might catch  
the real Christmas meaning...

that God, passionate and present brings us  
tender forgiveness, acceptance, and  
something else...

even against our better judgment, a fierce hug.

AMEN!