

Christmas Eve 2019

My guess is that for everyone in this room, everything felt different when we woke up this morning. It had nothing to do with the weather or the news or the kids who are eyeing the tree expectantly; it had to do with the roads we have been on to Bethlehem, and whether we would actually make it, loaded with our memories and our expectations and our hopes that it will all feel more magical than it ever has been. On this night, when heaven and earth are in full embrace, we really are all here, whether our Advent prayers have been about opening our hearts or making the craziness at the office stop or to please let me find that job, we really are here, looking down at someone so small it is hard to believe he can support his own weight, let alone the weight are placing on him.

Because tonight is all about time. It is the meeting of the time we know, all the hopes we have for those we know and love, all the happiness and the difficulties we have sustained, in its intersection with God's time, centered on a baby in the most unlikely of places among the least likely of people. And it could not begin in a more unassuming way. People are flocking to their home towns for a census, and Joseph and Mary the mother-to-be are arriving at Bethlehem. Amid the sudden appearance of the glory of the Lord, an angel appears, telling the shepherds in the surrounding fields about a Messiah, wrapped in cloth bands and lying in a manger. In the middle of all these events is a young family with a newborn, all with the wonderful gift and task of trying to get to know each other. Much of it we have heard before; this is, after all, the child announced to Mary by the angel, the one proclaimed by the prophet as the Prince of Peace, the divine Word of God entering our world. Many of the details are left to our imaginations, but it all happens while we and all of creation are attempting to understand its meaning within us and within God's plan of salvation. The everyday and the divine are knitted so closely that, if we are really paying attention, it is hard not to feel the shock of wonder at the mundane shot-through with the holy, no matter how familiar the words we have just heard seem to us.

Part of the reason we are celebrating is that we have reached a dividing line for us and for our world. Everything that happened before now happened before Christ and, from this point onward everything is after Christ. We have passed from the world of Emperor Augustus and Quirinius of Syria into a world where time has been suspended, if only for tonight. All birthdays are celebrations, but this one says as much about us as it does for the baby we are looking at. If we reach down to wipe some of the dirt off his forehead or brush the straw off the cloths that surround him, we realize that this is not a child out of the Hallmark cards that have shown up in our mailboxes the past few weeks. He cries as loudly as any infant we have ever heard and is as fragile-looking as any we have seen. And yet this is God before us, who could have come in overwhelming majesty but chose human flesh so that nothing we experience would ever be foreign to him. The membrane between what is human and divine is forever broken, for us as it is for him. The dirt on which we are stamping our shoes to keep warm, the sky that is so brilliant tonight, the wind that chills us as he reaches for his mother to pick him up, all of it is good enough for him, not only good enough but sacred because he participates in all of it. Everything we go through in our lives will be known and blessed by him, sanctified by a child that tonight has blessed all of humanity, all of creation.

For anyone who is convinced that God is something entirely apart from us, this is a hard night indeed. It is hard because there is something in us that resists mystery. We prefer the world of Quirinius and Augustus because that is the world we know. We live in a world that asks us to show-up at certain places during certain hours and, if we are lucky, allows us to pocket its rewards. If we see Christmas merely as a chance to get together and discuss the kids or the parents or the stock portfolios beside a fire, then we have risked nothing. But this is a night that asks us to risk everything for the sake of a God who has risked everything for us.

The great gift of this God entering our world, our time, among all its joys and brokenness, is that it happens in a world so thoroughly like our own, the joy of new life leavened by all the challenges

of our own humanity. Despite all the angels in full cry in the background, God was born on the road, and that is where we find ourselves. Our lives are not a series of snapshots, of Norman Rockwell moments; our lives are journeys, complete with times of triumph and despair, of health and brokenness. And the gift, greater and more meaningful than any of us will discover tonight, is the knowledge that this Emmanuel, this God-among- us, is with us in the most unlikely times, making holy all we triumph over and all we endure.

The fact is that we have all been on the road to Bethlehem, and the only thing more amazing than the dreams and expectations we have been carrying is that God chose to come among us as a child, amid all the triumphs and the disappointments of our lives, to be the fragile hope that is as important as the air we breathe. He would have been easier to spot if he had been a looming celestial figure, complete with light so dazzling that we could not have missed him. In fact, we probably would have known enough to keep our distance. But by arriving in the way he did, we know that the joy and the muck our lives are good enough, even holy enough. That is why it is so important that we hold him, even for a moment, because nothing we go through is too insignificant, especially for one so small. Everything is different tonight, and the miracle is that we can see it in a baby so tiny that he has blessed everything around us, from the dirt in the stall to the soil under our feet.

At the center of this night is a kind of humility, which is not about worthiness but which reminds us that we are of the earth, the same earth we scraped from his face, the earth that is sanctified because we know, from this night forward, he will be walking the same ground that we are, will participate in all the joys and hardships of being human. Thomas Merton wrote of this night, "Christmas is given us to make us love the kind of humility that is *love* and embraces contrarities and difficulties and all the rest with joy. Maybe he will give me some of his joy by being in the crib. How can I say I love him until I like what he likes?" Part of what it means to be human is to love these things that he has created, to give thanks for them, for disappointments and triumphs of the past year, for all that will greet us in the year ahead, because he has blessed it all. We can never be the same again because we have crossed the membrane of the holy into the year of our Lord, and the promise that we have is that we are loved beyond measure as the ordinary, sacred creatures we are.

So as we shake the straw and muck off our feet, as we listen to the child cry and laugh into the night, let us simply stop and feel how holy all of it is, how human and sacred and loved we are to be part of this celebration. For God is born this night, but he is also born the night after and every night we choose to see the holy in the everyday. There is gold shining through the straw, and if we listen to the angels we can hear the horses and the sheep bleating their praise with them. If we had any doubt before tonight, we are loved beyond measure, and there blessedly nothing we can do about it. What could not happen has come to pass, so celebrate for all you are worth, for everything the star shines on tonight is priceless.