

Bated Breath

Luke 2:1-14 [15-20]

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. ⁴ Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for see – I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.” And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!” [When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.” So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them

about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.]

When my children were small, I'd steal into their bedroom during the night to be certain they were still breathing. I would place my hand gently on their back to feel the rise and fall of their breath. Sometimes, I'd lean into the crib and suspend my own breathing so I could listen for theirs.

If there is a sweeter sound in all the world, I have no idea what it could be.

I wonder if Mary did the same. How long before the baby slept through the night? And that first sound; was it a wail, or something more like a whimper? Who coached Mary, a first-time mother, on the techniques of burping the baby?

The fullest account we have of the birth of Jesus comes from St. Luke, the physician. And it's a bit odd, isn't it, that a physician would provide us with so little detail. Had it been a difficult pregnancy? How long was Mary in labor? Surely generations to come, and women especially, would want to know.

And how did they arrive at the name, Mary and Joseph? "John" would have been a safer bet, I think, less likely to attract the notice of bullies on the playground. Or "Steve." Maybe "James"; he could be "Jimmy" through high school and then switch to the more dignified "James." But "Jesus"? A curious choice.

And Joseph, the stepfather? It's not easy being a stepfather – pretty thankless, in fact. What was Joseph thinking? Cute kid, but how am I going to afford college tuition? And Caesar's taxes that forced the couple to travel to Bethlehem in the first place. How was Joseph going to make those

payments, what with a wife and a baby to support? And where are those shepherds? They were supposed to be here half an hour ago.

The tableau in Bethlehem has become so familiar to us that we've lost sight of its significance; we've been lulled by twinkle lights and tinny music into thinking that this is just another cute scene we encounter on our way to the shopping mall. And when we do pause to consider the event, we tend to get lost in the enigma of virgin birth, which offends modern sensibilities. That simply isn't possible, we protest. We're educated, sophisticated people, after all; we know a thing or two about procreation. Certainly no one expects us to believe that Mary was really a virgin.

But such protestations miss the larger point. A baby born to a virgin is really the lesser miracle on this starry night in Bethlehem. The real wonder is that God became man, that the Almighty elected to enter human history as an infant – a small, helpless child. “The central miracle asserted by Christians is the Incarnation,” C. S. Lewis wrote. “They say that God became Man. Every other miracle prepares the way for this.” And once you have accounted for the miracle that God became human in the form of a tiny child, the virgin birth itself pales in significance.

Frederick Beuchner put it another way. “If you believe God was somehow in Christ, it shouldn't make much difference to you how he got there,” he writes. “If you don't believe, it should make less difference still.”¹

Tonight, lest we be swept away with sentiment, let's revisit the stable in Bethlehem with fresh eyes – and new questions. Why would the God of the universe choose to enter human history as a child? A human infant, biologists tell us, is the most helpless of beings. Unlike a wolf or a puppy or even a kitten, he cannot survive without protection. Left naked to the world,

¹ Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), 94.

he will perish. A newborn child cannot even turn over without assistance, cannot support herself or defend himself. This being is utterly dependent on others.

And yet God chose to become a baby, to grow and develop and live and love like all of us. God could have come to earth as a fearsome force, the angry avenger come to set things aright. But Jesus, the Almighty incarnate, came as a baby, clothed only in humanity – helpless against the drafty air of the stable, against the taunts of his playmates, against the barbs of his critics – and helpless, ultimately, against his accusers, who demanded his death.

In coming to earth as a baby, God embraced humanity in all of its pain and messiness and complexity. He lived as one of us. Many years later, this child, suspended between heaven and earth, once again naked to the world, would embody the dreams and sadness, the aspirations and sorrows of all humanity. His death would put things aright, would set in motion the impetus to reorder all of creation so that enemies could one day be reconciled and the lion will someday lie down with the lamb. And all who beheld him on that spike of lumber stretching toward the sky – then and for generations thereafter – sooner or later would be transformed.

Who could not be?

For the moment, however, we're still in Bethlehem peering into the stable. What is Joseph thinking? Is Mary anxious? Will she, like the rest of us who have ever been parents, steal into the baby's bedroom during the night and listen to the sweet music of the child's breathing?

There's nothing riding on this moment, of course – just the fate of the world and the whole drama of redemption. Does Mary, the new mother, have any clue about the future of this tiny, helpless child who will learn carpentry in Joseph's workshop and grow up to confound and exasperate the guardians of Jewish law? Does she know that this baby will cavort with fishermen and harlots and Samaritans and introduce to the world a radical new ethic, one

where love always – *always* – trumps law and thereby disrupts the tidy legal systems of his accusers? Does Mary recognize that there is something special about this child?

And does Mary know that, just as she witnessed the first breath of this special child, she will also watch, in helpless sorrow, his final exhalation? Does she realize that it will one day be her grim, motherly duty to retrieve the crumpled, broken body of this same baby, now grown into a man, from his lonely, wooden tower on Golgotha? And in that moment, that magnificent defeat, all the world will be made new.

Redemption on such a scale does not come cheap.

So on this starry night, this enchanted evening, as the angels flutter and Joseph frets, as the animals look on and the shepherds catch their breath, as Mary presses her hand against the baby's chest to monitor the rise and fall of his breathing, an infant sleeps in his mother's arms.

And all of creation waits with bated breath.

The Nativity of Our Lord

December 24, 2010

Christ Church

Middle Haddam, Connecticut