

THE BABY THING—THAT’S THE EASY PART

December 25, 2017

Luke 2:10-11

One beautiful aspect of the Christmas season is all the **BABY IMAGERY** that is on display everywhere! Everywhere you look, there are **PICTURES** of those two, **DARLING, NEW PARENTS: MARY AND JOSEPH** who just seem to be all smiles!

And yet again, there are **SOME ADDITIONAL PICTURES** of the other cast members in the story of our Lord’s Nativity too!

- Some are **ILL CLAD SHEPHERDS**; all of whom are rather rough and grimy in their appearance.
- **SOME ARE WISE MEN** who are clothed in **ROYAL ATTIRE LIKE MEN OF NOBILITY**.

The shepherds have come there, St. Luke tells us *“TO SEE THESE GREAT THINGS THAT HAVE COME TO PASS, WHICH THE ANGELS HAD MADE KNOWN TO THEM!”* While the Wise Men, St. Matthew tells us, have come there to present the newborn King *“WITH GIFTS OF GOLD AND FRANKINCENSE AND MYRRH.*

IF THE TRUTH BE TOLD, HOWEVER, THE WISE MEN PROBABLY DID NOT ARRIVE THERE IN BETHLEHEM UNTIL TWO YEARS LATER. Although Mary and Joseph are still residents in Bethlehem, when The Wise Men eventually do arrive there...by this time the **HOLY FAMILY** is now living in a house. And moreover, the Greek word, here, that is translated as **“CHILD”** becomes the equivalent of what you and I might call a **“TODDLER”** in our English language today!

BUT WHO REALLY HAS DECISIVELY DETERMINED THAT THE FIRST CHRISTMAS WAS LIMITED TO ONLY ONE 24-HOUR DAY, or according to the Church’s calendar, that Christmas is limited to only 12 24-HOUR DAYS—BECAUSE CHRISTMAS TAKES PLACE WHENEVER YOU AND I ARE BROUGHT TO FAITH IN THE INCARNATION OF OUR LORD AND SAVIOR JESUS CHRIST. CHRISTMAS IS SOMETHING THAT HAPPENS WHENEVER THE SON OF GOD BREAKS THROUGH THE DARKNESS OF SIN AND DEATH AND CALLS US INTO A VITAL, VIBRANT AND MEANINGFUL RELATIONSHIP WITH HIS HEAVENLY FATHER THROUGH HIM, WHOM HE came to reveal to us, and make known to us!

YES, RELIGIOUS ARTISTS, THROUGHOUT THE HISTORY OF THE CHURCH, HAVE ALSO TAKEN A GREAT DEAL OF RELIGIOUS LIBERTY in their portrayal of that **MOST HOLY NIGHT** and what it was that took place there!

In some of those medieval paintings depicting the events that took place there in Bethlehem on that night long ago, **EVEN THE ANIMALS HAVE HALOS**. And then, of course, there is, as already-stated, the **CENTERPIECE, THE BABY, SMILING EVEN AS HE SLEEPS--also, of course, with the BIGGEST, BRIGHTEST, YELLOW HALO ADORNING HIS TINY, LITTLE BABY’S HEAD!**

REALLY, WHAT’S NOT TO LIKE? WE ALL LOVE SOFT, SWEET, INNOCENT BABY STORIES.

RECENTLY I CAME ACROSS THE TRUE STORY OF A WOMAN NAMED HELEN WHO GAVE BIRTH TO HER FIRST AND ONLY CHILD WHEN SHE WAS 38 YEARS OLD. By this time, Helen and her husband had both given up all hopes of ever becoming parents; especially after a great many doctors, including SOME TOPNOTCH REPRODUCTIVE ENDOCRINOLOGISTS--had given to Helen and her husband their PERSONAL, PROFESSIONAL ASSESSMENT OF THEIR SITUATION!

BUT JUST AS HELEN AND HER HUSBAND HAD LOST ALL HOPE OF ONE DAY CONCEIVING A CHILD OF THEIR OWN, ALONG CAME THE CHILD THAT THEY HAD SO PATIENTLY AWAITED; THAT CHILD THAT THEY HAD SO FERVENTLY PRAYED FOR! For years, Helen remembered the personal response she gave to her pastor, who after knocking on her hospital door, the next morning, was invited by Helen to please ENTER her hospital room.

Immediately, the door swung open—and her pastor had walked into her hospital room, AND THERE SAT HELEN; PROUDLY HOLDING HER NEW BABY BOY IN HER ARMS! She said to her pastor, whom she knew quite well, with a smile: “At the risk of sounding sacrilegious, pastor, because this IS—TRUTHFULLY the last thing I’d ever want to do—I CAN’T IMAGINE HOW THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY, THE MOTHER OF JESUS, COULD HAVE BEEN ANY HAPPIER OR PROUDER OF HER SON THAN I WAS OF MINE!”

Helen was being sincere—BECAUSE SHE was so grateful for the gift of her long-awaited Child that had now, at long last, been born into the world!

Years later, when Helen’s son was about to graduate from college, that same pastor, who was still Helen’s pastor, recalled for her those words that she had spoken to him on the day FOLLOWING her son’s birth. And the pastor JUST FELT COMPELLED TO ASK HELEN: “And when your son reached his teenage years, were you still convinced that even Mary, the Mother of our Lord, could not have been happier or prouder of her son that you were of yours?”

She answered quickly: “Oh, no! Unlike Mary the mother of Jesus, when my son became a teenager, every time he left the house I gave serious thought to changing the locks on the doors!”

BABY STORIES ARE EASY BECAUSE BABIES, FOR THE MOST PART ARE EASY! They are cute and cuddly, comparatively speaking, because babies really don’t demand all that much---BESIDES AN OCCASIONAL BOTTLE FILLED WITH WARM MILK, OR A DIAPER CHANGE, OR A LULLABY. But eventually they grow up...just like Jesus did. Our lesson said, *"AND FROM YOU, O BETHLEHEM, SMALL AMONG THE CLANS OF JUDAH, WILL COME FOR ME ONE WHO SHALL RULE HIS PEOPLE ISRAEL."*

And that's where the rub comes in. It did for people two thousand years ago, and it still does for us today. **BECAUSE, ULTIMATELY, JESUS IS NOT A QUIET, CUDDLY BABY IN A MANGER, BUT A GROWN-UP RULER WHO ASKS THINGS OF US THAT WE SIMPLY DO NOT WANT TO DO.**

AM I REALLY WILLING TO FOLLOW WHEREVER IT IS THAT CHRIST LEADS ME? AND AM I REALLY WILLING TO DO WHATEVER IT IS THAT CHRIST ASKS ME TO DO? I mean, if we seriously consider the things that Jesus commanded, then choosing to sign on with him is not an easy choice to make. Have you really listened to some of the stuff He asks of us?

- "You must forgive your brother and your sister freely! And not just seven times, but seventy times seven times; that's some where's around 490 times!"
- Jesus tells me: "LOVE YOUR ENEMIES, AND PRAY FOR THOSE WHO DESPITEFULLY USE YOU."
- SOMEONE HAS ASKED: "TURN THE OTHER CHEEK HUH...THE LAST TIME THEY RECALLED DOING THAT, IT GOT SLAPPED, TOO!"

Choosing to be a Christian, you see, means choosing to live according to statements like those...not just to say, "*LORD, LORD*"...not just to sing, "*OH, HOW I LOVE JESUS*"...but to take seriously the grown-up MESSIAH WHO COMES TO RULE HIS PEOPLE ISRAEL. It means agreeing to follow where he leads, even if he leads me down highways that are not always comfortable.

Unlike Mary the mother of Jesus," that honest mother Helen said, **"when my son became a teenager, every time he left the house I gave serious thought to changing the locks on the doors!"**

But maybe, this isn't really all that different from the way that we do deal with Jesus; with the Jesus who "STANDS AT THE DOOR AND KNOCKS," but knowing what he wants, what he asks of us, what he commands of us, WE DECIDE TO HAVE THE LOCKS CHANGED INSTEAD!

The Rev. Dr. Michael B. Brown is currently the Senior Pastor of the Marble Collegiate Church in New York City, who recently wrote down the true story—that when he was growing up—one of the most influential pastors he had ever encountered in his life time was a dear personal friend of his father, who was also a United Methodist pastor.

This is what Pastor Brown wrote down: "That minister was in our house a lot when I was a young man, and sensing a call from the Holy Spirit to become a pastor myself one day, I more or less 'idolized' this man myself. He was one of the kindest, most gentle human beings I had ever known.

It was not until after that pastor died, that Michael Brown's father shared with him, the sad news, that that esteemed Methodist pastor who had just died had a deplorable childhood!

The deceased pastor had told Michael Brown's father that when he was only 5 years old that his mother died. Two years later, his father remarried, and for whatever reason his father's new wife had had;—she not only became his stepmother, but a stepmother who resented him and who abused him psychologically, and sometimes, even physically.

Often, when this boy's father was out of town, on business as a traveling salesman, she would become irrationally angry and lock him in the backyard all night long—even if the weather was cold, or extremely damp or rainy!

He would bang on the door, crying, begging to come in, as a young boy still in elementary school—promising her that he would try hard to do his best never to disappoint her anymore, even though he really had no idea why she was so angry or whatever it was he was apologizing for.

But, just the same, the lights would go out and the door would remain locked, and he would curl up upon the doormat on the back porch of their house and sleep there, all too often, like the family dog, crying and shivering in the darkness!

The next morning, she would open the door and say: "Get dressed for school. There's no time for breakfast. And you better not be late!"

Unfortunately, this was how this deceased pastor had actually, grown up! And yet, somehow, by the grace of God, he still grew up to be a fine, well-educated, successful man--and, in fact, to be a Methodist pastor of considerable distinction.

In his stepmother's later years, when she was confined to a bed by a debilitating illness, her own children basically deserted her and refused to have anything to do with her. So that same man, her stepson whom she had treated so unfairly, took her into his home and looked after her with compassion. He treated her with kindness and constant care, as if she had been the best mom ever. He made sure that her every need was met till the day she died, still living beneath his roof.

My dad said to him: "I can't believe you did that for her, after how she treated you."

And the Methodist pastor answered: "I didn't do it just for her. I also did it for myself. I reached a point where the burden of resentment was too heavy to carry around anymore. I couldn't be free of the pain till I was free of the hatred. And anyway," he said, "I decided if I cannot love people who make loving them difficult, how could I ever stand in a pulpit and preach about love to anyone else?"

That became the deciding factor in this man's life! If he really was going to be a true follower of Jesus Christ in this world! If he didn't want to just talk about following Jesus—then he became determined to wake up each morning and try his best to follow Jesus—even when the circumstances in his life seemed to be indescribably difficult for him! He didn't just talk

about following Jesus! He woke up each morning and tried his best to follow Jesus when the circumstances in his life seemed to be so indescribably difficult.

As he grew up to be a man, and continued to mature spiritually, he eventually came to that point in his sanctification where he came to believe that instead of his simply willing to be the kind of Christian that would JUST OOH AND AWE OVER A BABY LAYING ON A MANGER IN A BETHLEHEM STABLE—A CHILD WHO WOULD NEVER ASK ANYTHING OF ANYONE.

INSTEAD, HE HAD NOW SIGNED ON WITH A FULL-GROWN MESSIAH WHO CONTINUES ALWAYS TO ASK BIG THINGS, GIGANTIC THINGS OF ALL THOSE WHO GENUINELY ANSWER HIS CALL TO BECOME HIS DISCIPLES!

"AND FROM YOU, O BETHLEHEM, SMALL AMONG THE CLANS OF JUDAH, WILL COME FOR ME ONE WHO SHALL RULE HIS PEOPLE ISRAEL."

You see, Christianity is not merely meant to be a faith that we profess. It's also designed by our Heavenly Father to become a lifestyle we embrace. It's not enough that we simply "talk the talk," but we also must "walk the walk!"

Truly becoming and remaining a Christian means that we are to follow wherever Jesus leads us—living as Jesus lived—and loving as Jesus loved, even when it would be much, much easier for you and me not to do that!

I love Christmas, don't you? But let's remember that with respect to our Lord's own life and our desire to be one with him, that his being a Baby, even a Baby as the sinless Son of God, was even for our Savior—the easy part! Much more difficult for Jesus was the cross he had to bear for you and me! Yes, it was the Father's will, but he also tells us plainly: "No takes my life from me! I have the power to lay it down! And the power to take it up again! Amen