

**Homily for Christmas Eve  
December 24, 2011  
Trinity Church in Menlo Park  
The Rev. Matthew R. Dutton-Gillett**

A couple decades ago when I was in seminary, I worked part-time as a desk clerk at a small hotel in Boston. I guess you could say I identify with the whole “No room in the inn” thing. The woman who was in charge of housekeeping in that hotel was a Jehovah’s Witness, a group who do not believe that celebrating Christmas is appropriate. She was a very nice person, but once she learned of my ultimate career path, the door was opened to the occasional uncomfortable religious discussion. And I suppose it was inevitable, given her background, that the question of Christmas would eventually arise. When it did, she argued quite forcefully against the celebration. The lynch-pin of her argument was this: “You have no idea when Jesus was born! So celebrating it on December 25 is arbitrary. There’s no evidence for it whatsoever.” My come back, which left her entirely unimpressed, was at once rather obvious and perhaps a bit lame: “Well, he WAS BORN, and since we don’t know the date, what’s the harm in picking one?”

Indeed, Christians did pick a date to celebrate the birth of a man they knew to have existed but whose date of birth was undocumented. Their choice was not an arbitrary one. They chose the date of a popular pagan Winter Solstice celebration and transformed it into a celebration of the birth of Jesus. After all, people were already accustomed to partying this time of year, so why not?

All of this highlights the nature of Christmas itself: it is a birthday that is more than a birthday. It celebrates the fact of Jesus’ birth by telling a story that goes well beyond that fact in order to offer something to us that is profoundly meaningful.

If you have ever witnessed the birth of a child, or been the actual birth-giver, you know that virtually none of what happened in the course of the delivery is included in Luke’s story of the birth of Jesus that we just heard. Child birth is a messy, painful business. The language employed in the delivery room is not necessarily always sweet or loving (particularly in the absence of pain medication!). There is a lot that can go wrong – it’s a time full of danger – and perhaps the greatest miracle of childbirth is that most of the time, not much does go wrong. Reading Luke’s account of the birth of Jesus conveys none of this reality. I think that if Mary and Joseph read it, they would say, “Wait -- is he talking about us? Gosh, we remember that night a little differently.”

But, of course, Luke was not interested in giving us blow by blow account of Mary’s labor. In other words, he wasn’t interested in what happened in the delivery room (or, if you prefer, delivery stable). He was interested in what it all meant. And so his writing captures with stunning clarity and unparalleled beauty the way the birth of Jesus **felt** to the world and the community who received him. And, if we are absolutely honest, the way the parents of any child feel when they safely bring that child into the life of the world.

Luke's story describes the Jesus that he came to know: the one who was experienced by the early Christian community as Emmanuel, which means "God with us" or "God among us." Jesus became for his followers the image of a human life filled with God. And so Luke tells his story from this point of view, and in his story the world stops on the night of Jesus' birth, holds its breath for a moment and then sings out in joyful celebration.

I can tell you that on the two occasions when I was the witness in the delivery room that each time I held each of my children for the first time it was exactly like Luke describes: the world stopped, held its breath for a moment, and then sang out in joyful celebration. No one else noticed that the world had stopped and held its breath and then began to sing, except their mother. But we knew, and we knew that God had visited us.

Whenever a child is born, the celebration that follows always forms an intersection between the fact of that child's existence and the hopes, dreams, and longings of parents and family. The meaning of the birth is far greater than the facts that surround it. It is why parents have a hard time letting go of their children and why, sometimes, we seem to put a lot of expectations on their shoulders. Because they are bearers of the hopes and dreams and longings of their families. They are the next generation whom we somehow hope will do better than we have.

The birth of Jesus does the same thing for the entire human family, or at least the entire Christian family. As that wonderful old hymn goes, "the hopes and fears of all the years are met in him." Christmas is a four way intersection that brings together the fact of Jesus' existence, the meaning of his life, the longings of the human heart and God's constant desire to love us into wholeness. Luke's story stands at the middle of this intersection to break open our hearts so that, in the words of that same hymn, the dear Christ might enter in.

The head of housekeeping at the hotel I worked for was right: December 25 is a chosen date with no relation to Jesus' actual date of birth, and the known facts surrounding Jesus' birth are few. But I have always felt sorry for her because, in the end, she seemed to me incapable of wonder. For Christmas was never about an accurate accounting of Jesus' birth. It has always been about wonder, about allowing ourselves to be amazed at the mystery a life filled with God.

As you revisit Luke's wonderful story this season, may wonder and amazement be yours. And when this season has passed, may you find that Christ has been renewed in your heart, allowing you to be a bit more filled with God in the year to come.