

NOBODY UNDERSTANDS THIS AT ALL

A sermon preached by the Rev. Phillip Channing Ellsworth, Jr., The Feast of the Holy Nativity, Christmas Eve, December 24, 2009 at Saint Francis Episcopal Church, Potomac, Maryland. Based on The Gospel according to Luke, 2: 1 – 20.

Under what circumstances were you born? I wonder. As for me, my parents were on their naugahyde couch in Fort Bliss, Texas, watching Major Seth Adams, Flint McCullough, and a cheerful, comical cook named Charlie Wooster lead a wagon train from Missouri to California. They hadn't been long in Kansas when my mother went into labor sending my father out to start the car. It didn't. The battery was dead. A devout couple named Robertson lived next door and my parents recall how good they were to us. Sgt. Robertson put us in his car and ran two red lights on Dyer Street to get us to the hospital in time. It was Mrs. Robertson, my first baby-sitter, who first took me to church on Sundays.

My wife was born at home in Brussels. Her physician father found the obstetrical practices of Belgian hospitals at that time substandard so he prepared to have her born at home. They lined up a missionary nurse to assist. At two in the morning labor started. The kitchen table was brought up the stairs of their apartment to their large, tiled Belgian-style bathroom. And there, at eight in the morning, on the kitchen table Victoria was born. Dad White went to the court to register her birth. The clerk handed him \$50 as a gift from the *Commune Wolluë Saint Pierre*. (I like to tell my children their mother was born between the salt & pepper shakers, but herewith a confession: that detail is mythological.)

Christmas makes us think of home. We come home for Christmas. Jesus left home for Christmas. The home he left is one of awesome splendor and majestic beauty. Paul writes of God, "He who alone is immortal lives in unapproachable light." The Psalmist says, "Splendor and majesty are before him, strength and glory are in his sanctuary. Righteousness and justice are the foundation of your throne. Love and faithfulness go before you."

Jesus is not a guru who came to teach us some helpful insights about the nature of God or the moral life. He claims that he came to this world in order to live and to die for us, the saviour of sinners. He said, for example, "I have come down from heaven not to do my will but to do the will of him who sent me." You and I can't say that kind of thing. The Apostle Paul said, "When the time had fully come, God sent his son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law, that we might receive the full rights of sonship." On the eve of his crucifixion, Jesus describes the home from which he came when he came into this world. Praying to the one he taught us to call Father, he says, "I brought you glory on earth

by completing the work you gave me to do. And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory that I had with you before the world began." Paul sums all of this up in this way: "You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich yet for your sake he became poor so that you through his poverty might become rich."

I think it was Irenaeus, one of the earliest of the early church fathers, who said accurately, "God can only heal that which God becomes." Easy for him to say. From the perspective of the Archangel Gabriel the circumstances of Jesus' birth mystify entirely. So this Christmas Eve, here's my gift to you, a little truth in advertising: No man or woman, no angel, understands this at all.

So let me say to those of you whom I love to see tonight and would delight to see more often, if your heart catches at what we celebrate tonight, if you sing with the heavenly host and you hear in your deepest heart what the shepherds heard and you rejoice to celebrate what Christians around the world rejoice to celebrate with you this night, let me tell you a secret: It doesn't get any harder than this, what we Christians believe. At Christmas and Easter, the Faith ask us to believe the two things hardest to believe. And yet look at you: dressing up and rushing to embrace the One who will demand of you not less than everything.

It was G. K. Chesterton who wrote, "A mass of legend and literature, which increases and will never end, has repeated and rung the changes on this single paradox; that the hands that had made the sun and stars were too small to reach the huge heads of the cattle." Christmas is the condescending love of the One who created the world by fiat becoming *infans*, not speaking, vulnerable, the size of a loaf of bread. In the fullness of time, the One who is so good to us ran more than two red lights in the dark. And behold, here we are, beloved; eating the crumbs that fall from that table.

O Blessed Lord Jesus, our choicest gift, our dearest guest, let not our souls be busy inns that have no room for you and yours, but quiet homes of prayer and praise where you may find the best company, where needful cares of life are wisely ordered and put away, and where wide, sweet spaces are kept for you. So when you come again, O Blessed One, may you find all things ready, and your servants waiting for no new master, but for one long loved and known. Even so; come Lord Jesus. Amen.