

Accepted

The young man rushed up to the religion professor after class and practically yelled: "I can't buy this stuff about a virgin birth! Do I have to believe in a miraculous birth in order to believe in Jesus?!" The professor replied, "In one sense no, but in another sense, yes, you do." "We start you off on the easier truths, like the virgin birth, and then move to the harder truths: like, the poor and the outcast are God's royalty while the rich and successful are in big trouble. Like, love your enemy; forgive every time you are asked for forgiveness; and, trust in God rather than in military might."

Compared to these, the virgin birth isn't so hard to swallow, is it?

Just as the virgin birth, God creating anew in Mary's womb, without our help, is a foundation stone of our faith, so too are these other truths. And for most of us, swallowing the notion of a virgin birth is far easier than opening doors, and opening hearts, to our enemy; far easier than seeing the face of Jesus in that bum holding a sign asking for loose change at the traffic light; far easier than giving freely of what we have; far easier than taking up our cross and following him.

This night, God breaks into our world, into the ordinary lives of smelly shepherds, of paranoid kings, of Persian wise men and of an unwed teen and her baffled fiancé. This night, God comes to those on the outside, to those living in the outskirts, and says to them:

"Behold! I bring you tidings of great joy!"

Rounding up those on the outside is something Christmas has done for over 2000 years. And tonight is no different.

Tonight, much like Easter Sunday, is a time when many will venture into these pews, pews that are otherwise unfamiliar most of the rest of the year. Perhaps the reason each of you come is

entirely personal, entirely different from the reason that brings your pew mate.

Perhaps you fear that in the week in, and week out, of worship, the church may not be a friendly place.

Its regulars, perhaps, are not friendly people. Perhaps, you fear you have sinned, or are unworthy, or are simply worried that your life is somehow less than holy, that this is not the place for you. Yet this night, you are here.

Or perhaps you feel none of these things. Perhaps your life is a good one. Your self-esteem is intact. You have few if any regrets. Yet this night, here you are.

And this night, as we remember to whom and how God chose to come among us, whether or not you lay judgments upon yourself, whether or not you have fears that may be eating your soul, whether or not you hold doubts in your heart; it can all be brought as an offering here; and laid at the feet of the child; this child who comes to make all things new.

I know it is a challenge to say that. I know that it is a challenge to hear it. The child has made all things new? Not really. Not if you just look around. Wars continue to rage. Our political discourse can't seem to rise above the level of a shout or a sneer. Unemployment is high, the life so many thought was a sure thing has disappeared, the poor increase in numbers and in misery. Why make the claim that all things are new? We are not the first to ask this question. Probably, we will not be the last.

At the worst of the Bosnian war in the early 1990s, as guns were fired and atrocities committed, a Christmas Eve service was held in Sarajevo, at St. Anthony's Church. Jews and Muslims joined the Christians at a standing room only service in the basement of the church. When asked why she was there, a Jewish woman replied:

"We people of Sarajevo have shared everything else, I just wanted to be here with the others to share this."

The parish priest stood before a make shift altar, and said: "How can we speak of a happy Christmas as we stand here in the heart of this besieged city? What is there left in life as we have lost fathers, mothers, husbands and wives and even our children?"

The priest then began to reflect on the life and suffering of Jesus, especially his sense of abandonment as he hung from the cross. From the deep well of the Gospel, the priest drew these words: "Jesus teaches us that human judgments are not the last judgments, that human justice is not the last justice, and that the power that humans exercise over one another is not the last power." Rutledge, *The Bible and the NYT*, 59.

No matter your circumstances, no matter your pain, no matter your success, your true identity is that of a child of God. And even more, you are a beloved child of God. Beloved by the child that God himself became. Beloved by a God who knows every form of human difficulty, and who promises NOT to rescue us from danger, but to be *with us* always, in the *midst* of every danger. Perhaps it is to be reminded of that unalterable fact; perhaps that is why you are here tonight.

This holy night, as we celebrate God *becoming one of us*, we are invited to remember that we are *each of us made* in the image of God. "It has been said that if we really knew how to see with the eyes of the soul, we would see angels going before every person we meet, saying: "Make way for the image of God! Make way for the image of God!" Long, *Testimony*, 46.

This night, God says to the whole world, "You are accepted. You are accepted by that which is greater than you, the name of which you do not know. Do not *ask* for the name now; perhaps you will find it later. Do not try to *do* anything now; perhaps later you

will do much. Do not *seek* for anything; do not *intend* anything. Simply accept the fact that you are accepted." Tillich.

In this child, through the grace of God, all of humanity is home free. The desert blooms, the virgin gives birth, and you, my friends, are accepted.

May you enter your days holding fast to this truth.

+amen