

For Unto Us a Child Is Born

Isaiah 9:2-7; Luke 2:1-20

John Breon

I've always liked the story of the cartoon that appeared in the *New York World* in 1925, celebrating Abraham Lincoln's birthday. Two Kentucky farmers are pictured, talking over a wood fence. One asks, "Anything new happen lately?" The other replies, "Nothing much. A new baby was born over at Tom Lincoln's place, but nothing much ever happens around here."

Can you picture some people standing on a corner in Bethlehem? "Anything new happen around here?" "Nah, just a baby born in a stable. Nothing much ever happens around here" (James Harnish, 1995, *Homiletics Online*).

The birth of a baby is always special. I stood by when each of our three children was born. We don't want to get overly sentimental about birth—there is pain, it is messy, and many children are not born into ideal circumstances. Still, we can recognize that each birth is unique and each child is unique. We may not always see how significant a newborn is though. The prophet Isaiah had spoken of the birth of a baby who would be a sign of God's presence with the people. He was to be named Immanuel (7:14). Now, Isaiah speaks again of a child to be born. He may still be talking about Immanuel. In the promise of a future king descended from David, Isaiah is giving hope to people under threat of war. He is shining God's light into the darkness the people live in.

Still, there was more to this child who was to be born than even Isaiah knew. When our children were born, my dad quoted Ben Franklin saying, "A baby is all future." I remember a story of a woman and her little son at Christmastime, stopping to look at a life size Nativity scene. The woman was a servant and they didn't have much. Her little boy was drawn to the baby in the manger. He kept getting closer and looking at the baby. The mother was heard to say, "Mary had such high hopes for her child." What hopes do we have?

The people of Israel had great hopes for a new king, a son of David, a messiah, to deliver them and lead them. But in the greater fulfillment of

Isaiah's words, the baby born to Mary is somehow God with us. He was "great David's greater Son." He is the Messiah. He is Savior and Lord.

Isaiah had said, "For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given." When Jesus was born, an angel said to some shepherds, "Today, in the town of David a Savior has been born *to you*; he is Christ the Lord."

Jesus is the reality Isaiah was looking for. Jesus fulfills what Isaiah said about the coming king/messiah. The titles Isaiah pronounced had meaning for an earthly king, but their greatest meaning is in Jesus.

He is called *Wonderful Counselor*. "Wonderful" here means something like "supernatural," beyond human ability. Kings were seen as counselors who gave advice and guidance to the people. Jesus as wonderful counselor is the intimate personal Savior. He is the Wisdom of God and the Word of God among us and for us and with us. He gives wisdom and insight and direction. He hears and cares about all our problems, concerns, needs, and fears. He is the one we can turn to and rely on. He gives us strength and help.

Jesus is also *Mighty God*. For the people hearing Isaiah's message, this would mean that their king would be a great warrior with God-like strength. But there is more to it than that. Jesus was born like any other baby. His conception was miraculous, but his birth was ordinary. And this one who was born is the mighty God. He is not only intimate and close to us. He is exalted and holy and powerful. "We need the reassurance of an Almighty God on our side when we confront the forces of hate and violence [and other evil] in this world. We depend on the long-distance vision of an Almighty God to see us through the confusion of the stages and ages even our brief lifetimes pass through" (*Homiletics Online*).

He is called *Everlasting Father*. The people might see their king as a father who provided for them and protected them. Jesus reveals God as Father in a new way, in a closer and more personal way than anyone had seen before. The God who is with us in Jesus Christ is eternal and because he lives forever his kingdom never ends. In Jesus, God shows us his desire for us to be his children, to live in his care and provision—and to experience his discipline. Jesus reveals the heart of God and that's very good news about the nature and character of God.

Jesus is *Prince of Peace*. The people hearing Isaiah would have seen in this title the promise that the new king's reign would not only begin with deliverance but would also assure them of no more war. For people living under the constant threat of invasion and destruction, that would truly be good news.

For us, Jesus as Prince of Peace shows that he is an earthly Savior. That is, the salvation he brings has to do with life here. He is about more than just taking us to heaven—he intends to transform this world. When Jesus walked the earth as Prince of Peace, he challenged us to love God and each other. He taught us how to “do justly and love mercy and walk humbly with God.” He showed us how to live the way of peace, wholeness, integrity, well-being, healing, and salvation.

If we are followers of Jesus, we walk in his ways. If we are ruled by the King that Isaiah described, we will live his way and we will seek to let him rule in all of life. To do that we still rely on God-with-us in the Holy Spirit.

Our celebrations of the birth of Jesus call us to follow the way of Jesus' life every day.

One of the ways our family celebrates is by putting Nativity scenes in our corner cabinet. One year we almost lost the Holy Family. Not the small wooden figures. And not the small ceramic figurines. But we have two hand-carved statues of Mary holding Jesus and Joseph looking on, both joyful and protective. The year we almost lost them, we had put them away while doing some cleaning and rearranging. When it came time to decorate for Christmas, we couldn't find them. Some olive wood camels stood on their shelf, as if looking for the Holy Family. Finally, one day, Nancy found them in a cabinet behind some stuff that we hadn't looked behind. Then they took their place on the shelf of the corner cabinet with the miniature camels looking up at them.

In *Kneeling in Bethlehem*, Ann Weems writes about her Nativity figurines:

Boxed

I must admit to a certain guilt
about stuffing the Holy Family
into a box in the aftermath of Christmas.

It's frankly a time of personal triumph when, each Advent's eve,
I free them (and the others) from a year's imprisonment boxed in
the dark of our basement.

Out they come, one by one, struggling through the straw, last
year's tinsel still clinging to their robes.

Nevertheless, they appear, ready to take their place again in the
light of another Christmas.

The Child is first because he's the one I'm most reluctant to box.

Attached forever to his cradle, he emerges, apparently unscathed
from the time spent upside down to avoid the crush of the lid.

His mother, dressed eternally in blue, still gazes adoringly, in spite of
the fact that her features are somewhat smudged.

Joseph has stood for eleven months, holding valiantly what's left of
his staff, broken twenty Christmases ago by a child who hugged a
little too tightly.

The Wise Ones still travel, though not quite so elegantly,
the standing camel having lost its back leg and the sitting camel
having lost one ear.

However, gifts intact, they are ready to move.
The shepherds, walking or kneeling, sometimes confused with

Joseph (who wears the same dull brown), tumble forth, followed by three sheep in very bad repair.

There they are again, not a grand set surely, but one the children (and now the grandchildren) can touch and move about to re-enact that silent night.

When the others return, we will wind the music box on the back of the stable and light the Advent candles and go once more to Bethlehem.

And this year, when it's time to pack the figures away, we'll be more careful that the Peace and Goodwill are not also boxed for another year!

(Homiletics Online)