

SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

Fifth Avenue · New York City

Sunday, December 25, 2022
Christmas Day

Procession and Solemn Eucharist of the Nativity
11 a.m.

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A Sermon by
The Rev. Matthew Moretz, *Vicar*
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The Real Christmas

I've witnessed two births in my life. In both cases, births that were fully surrounded by the technology and wisdom of our medical age. Buttressed by months of through preparation and guidance beforehand, and months of specialized care afterwards. For the moment of birth itself, we couldn't have been in a better place or with better people, in the inner sanctum of the hospital, surrounded by devices for any contingency, with a team of the finest doctors and nurses all bringing their decades of expertise and experience into concerted focus on this little soul's entrance into the world. And despite all of this, a panorama of safety and care, even routine, this had no power to subside the tidal forces of anxiety and worry, the fears, the tears. The unspoken suspense coursing through the chest. And then the passage of the child into the world, through their mother, no moment more pivotal or visceral. Then the deafening silence, existence churning like pulled taffy, and then that burst of breath, the cry of shock and alarm piercing the heart, the red screaming face with closed eyes and shaking tongue, and then, indomitably, reality returns to its former shape, the routines take the lead, the plans ensure, the care for the child, the care for the mother, there's no longer time to dwell on the abyss that we had all just traversed, there is so much work to do, so much care to perform, and a new era ahead. Would I call the births "beautiful"? No. I would instead call them deeply real. And if not quite beautiful on the outside, there is something beautiful going, you can feel it, somehow reality *deepens*. In the child's entrance, the world is renewed, and there is so much more than there was before. And it is not addition, it is more like multiplication, or an entirely new dimension, a Revelation wrapped up in a Genesis!

But in most of the liturgy, music, and iconography of the Nativity, in all of the traditional pageants and set pieces, there is this steadfast sense of peace and serenity. It is sometimes presented as a serene story that slowly builds to the silent night in the stable. In these beautiful scenes from Bethlehem, we can get this assured sense of impending victory as if it is inappropriate to feel anything other than confidence that this is all going to work out. And yet, this standard presentation can overlook the struggle of this first Christmas, the tumult that surrounds this family as they fight to make their way to the culmination of God's promise to them and their people. Mary and Joseph were in a storm of emotion and tumult. And the duel between despair and hope must have taken place over the course of a sort of birth that, unlike the births that we might be familiar with, a birth that provided no comfort, and danger compounded upon danger, where everything was going wrong.

For one, Mary and Joseph were enmeshed in the perpetual danger of occupation by a foreign power. And to make things worse, right before Mary was to have her baby, it became tax season. A significant portion of the family's wealth was going to be extracted, with no argument to make. Careless of her needs, the occupying power forcibly transferred the family to Joseph's birth place, a four days' journey from Nazareth. I wonder if that journey expedited the birth? It was certainly not in the best interest of their health. But think of how crestfallen you would be if the birth of your child couldn't happen at home, with your family and friends,

with the family's midwife, without a well-worn plan of care. And then to have to sort out what to do during a time when there was no lodging available.

Such a cold world, isn't it! Not a bed for her. Not a crib for the baby. Just some side room for the animals. They would have provided some warmth. So would the cloth and hay. But to bear a child in a place not of your choosing, with no anesthetic, with just Joseph, however dedicated, pushing through all that pressure and pain, pushing through all that worry and fear and suspense. Would the baby live? Would you live? Would the promises perish in that stable?

And yes, the birth is successful, we know this to be so. But, goodness, they didn't. Even after the birth, I am sure they carefully watched every breath. And then, as they entered into the sleepless nights and days of early parenthood, where dreams blur into reality, they then are thrust into even more angst and fear, with an immediate need to escape the head of state, the one who is willing to make spies out of the devoted, to hunt them, to kill anyone he suspects could be the child, and to flee even further from home, to the land that once had enslaved their people, Egypt. It is unclear how long after the birth that they would have fled, but, when they did, it could have taken them months to make their way to safety, to a life of exile, even more isolated from their home and society, powerless to return until the king is dead.

Would you call this first Christmas "beautiful"? Is the world that Christmas reveals "beautiful"?

And yet, in Christmas we Christians envelope ourselves in resplendent moments, in the very height of what our artistry can produce. Should we call the first Christmas resplendent, or raw?

Temptation that we don't measure up to Christmas. That our lives fall short. But broken life is the soil from which this branch of Jesse has sprung.

For most of Christmas, we celebrate the fullness of the day, the joy of it, the triumph of it, the great gift that is Christ with us to vanquish the dreadful power of sin and death. Christmas in hindsight, is so serene and assured, from that eternal viewpoint. But perhaps this morning, perhaps only for this sermon, we can stop and ponder in our hearts that the joy we feel today, is the fruit of hope and faith, and not just any hope and faith, but that of a mother who endured a tremendously disruptive event, in agony, angst, and tumult, ever trusting in the promise even through compounding calamity. And in that storm, Mary's endurance, Joseph's endurance, became a harbor, a harbor for God to approach these earthly shores, and live among us, and bring life to us, beyond all former reckoning.

The miracle of the Incarnation is not the beauty of our Christmas celebrations, but that to which they point, the revelation that God is *with* us, with us as we are, whether steady or stumbling, taking our hand, in fear and pain, in triumph and joy, in all of it, and that no matter what, that as God is with us, God is *for* us.

God comes to us through a birth gone wrong, a death gone wrong, and if your Christmas is all wrong, if it doesn't fit on a Christmas card, or in the plot of a Christmas special. Well, I hope you can see that the first Christmas wouldn't fit there either. The grit required for the holy family to survive Christmas, let alone keep the faith and their eyes on God's promise, is the same grit we ask God to give us, so that we, in hope and faith may endure in our cold world, where catastrophe and calamity compound, snow on snow, so that God's presence may continue to find safe harbor and warm shelter in our hearts and in our lives.