

Christmas Eve 2009
Luke 2:1-20

“And while they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son, and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.”

That’s what Luke tells us about the birth of Jesus. And that is ALL Luke tells us about the birth of Jesus. It’s short. It’s sweet. It’s to the point. Like an old-fashioned, printed birth announcement ... name, date, weight of baby ... it conveys the news, but it somehow fails to share the drama.

These days, we expect so much more in the way of information about such an important event. I mean, really ... where is the video, posted on YouTube? Where are the photos, uploaded by mobile to Facebook? Where are the tweets, the texts, the moment by moment, breathless reports as each contraction comes and goes? Where is the long blog entry written in a haze of post-delivery euphoria? The PowerPoint slide show of the whole experience?

No, Luke leaves it at this. “The time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son, and wrapped him in bands of cloth and laid him in a manger.”

There is so much that goes unspoken in this short, spare little description. On one side of those sentences, we find Mary and Joseph, parents-to-be, far from home, on their own, traveling with this still-unknown, as-yet-unseen, unborn baby whom they have been told is God’s own child, the one who will save his people, the one who will change everything.

And indeed he will. Change everything. Starting with Mary and Joseph.

Because on the other side of those sentences, we find Mary and Joseph in their new identities, as brand-new parents of a baby boy. Yes indeed, there he was at last --Jesus, ready or not -- a tiny, screaming, demanding, vulnerable, hungry, confused, incontinent and incoherent little person. So Mary wrapped him in bands of cloth and laid him in a manger, and then she and Joseph must have looked, first down at him and then up at each other, and said, “NOW WHAT?”

There is so much Mary and Joseph didn't know, that they couldn't possibly have known, about what that moment would be like. Even living in a small, agrarian community where children and babies were everywhere, they couldn't have known what it would be like for them, there in Bethlehem that night, as they became parents for the very first time.

Even today – even with all the books and magazines and TV shows and blogs and support groups and friendly coffee conversations – there's so much that can never be adequately described about giving birth, about bringing a brand-new human being into the world, about the changes that will happen when you are no longer a couple, but have become a family, and about what it means to be a parent, to have a child completely and totally dependent upon you at every hour of the day and night.

What you *think* it's going to be like is something like this:

When I was pregnant, I subscribed to a magazine for expectant parents. (That was, of course, the FIRST time I was pregnant, when I still had time to read magazines.) And there were ads in this magazine, ads for things like baby supplies and formula, and furnishings and clothing. But it was the ads for a certain laundry detergent that got me. A slender, beautiful woman, clad in a white nightgown, sat in a rocking chair, holding her infant, who was wrapped in a beautiful white receiving blanket.

And the whole room was white, and the shelves were filled with beautiful white sheets and blankets and diapers and outfits, and the woman smiled at her baby as though all the peace of the world had come upon her there, in that beautiful white room, because of that angelic, sleeping child.

What it's *really like* ends up being more like this:

A few months later, after the birth of my son, I started getting a magazine for parents of new babies. And in that magazine, there was an ad for that very same laundry detergent. The beautiful woman had been replaced by a harried-looking creature in stained sweats, with a baby urping down her back, and toys and dirty towels and rumpled sheets, and piles and piles and piles of filthy laundry all around her, and the woman looked as though there was not enough laundry detergent in the world to get her out of this incredible, noisy, never-ending mess she had gotten herself into, all because of that adorable, beloved, helpless, puking child.

Babies change everything. They re-order your priorities. They disturb your sleep. They refocus your objectives. They force you to re-examine how you spend your time, your money, your efforts. They direct all of that – priorities, objectives, time, money, efforts, even sleep – towards themselves. You forever after see the world in a new way, because this child has entered it. You forever after see yourself in a new way, because this child has entered your life, for good, forever, no matter what.

That's what Mary and Joseph must have learned, not only with their minds, but in their hearts, that night so long ago in Bethlehem. All the promises they had heard about this child, that he would be the savior of their people, the one to bring humanity home to God, the one they would call Immanuel – God-with-us, that he would change EVERYTHING ... it all must have seemed vaguely unreal until they held that tiny, squalling infant at last, and wrapped him up, and soothed him to sleep.

NOW WHAT? They must have said to one another in the darkness of that night.

Now what?

That is the question posed to each of us on this most holy night. It is the question posed by the arrival of this infant, once again, into our annual, overwrought, cultural celebration of food and family and gifts and feasting and frenzy. Christ is born, not only long ago in Bethlehem, but here, now, in this gathering, in this celebration, in this meal of sacred bread and wine that we are about to share.

Christ is born, as Christ is always born, on Christmas. And the question we must answer, just as Mary and Joseph had to answer it, is simply this:

Now what?

Because we have a choice, each of us, on this most holy night. We can let Christ be born ... after a fashion. We can let Christ be born in a way that is much more like that beautiful laundry detergent ad. We can look around at this exquisitely decorated church, and we can listen as those old endearing carols tug at our heartstrings once again, and we can admire the tiny figure of the baby in the manger scene at the foot of the altar, and we can hold our candles and sing “Silent Night” in the darkened church and we can love, oh we can just love on Baby Jesus with all our hearts, for about five full minutes.

But here’s the rub. You see, Jesus is not a picture on a Christmas card. He’s not a tiny doll in a Nativity set. He’s not even a character in a beloved Christmas carol. Jesus is alive. And Jesus is real. And if we are really willing to let Jesus be born tonight, he will be as demanding, and provoking, and life-changing for each and every one of us as he was for Mary and Joseph, back there in Bethlehem, so long ago.

If we are really willing to let Jesus be born tonight, then I have to warn you ... it will be an experience far more like the **SECOND laundry detergent ad than the first one.**

Because Jesus will mess up our beautifully arranged lives. He will re-order our priorities. He will disturb our sleep. He will re-focus our objectives. He will force us to re-examine how we spend our time, our money, our efforts. He will make our lives much more challenging, but much more real, and in the end, much, much, much more rewarding, and satisfying and joyful.

We will forever after see the world in a new way, because this child has entered it. We will forever after see ourselves in a new way, because this child has entered our lives, for good, for ever, no matter what.

Now what?

Which baby will you welcome into your heart tonight? The perfect, untroublesome, uncontroversial Christ Child of all those Christmas cards and manger scenes?

Or Jesus, alive and kicking, wailing and shrieking for our love, looking for you and looking for me and looking for all the world to take a chance,

to take him in,

to let him be born in us,

and to let him change ... everything.