

# The Baby, The Event, The Hope

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## I “The Baby”

There are some facts of existence which rouse us, claim us, awaken us. The crack of lightning splitting the darkness in the storm; the soaring of a bald eagle; the perfect miniature fingers or even the sleep of a newborn baby. For these particular moments, we feel more alive, more grateful.

For many, many people these moments come and go, however, and leave no permanent mark. The storm lets up, the bald eagle disappears over the hilltop, the baby wakes up or spits up or grows up. The wonder of new birth brings many closer to God, the Lord and giver of life—but even a newborn does not force anyone to believe in God. Lots of people simply take the new life as it comes and do their best to be good parents—no deep, spiritual questions asked. Life remains relatively uncomplicated for them: they enjoy the new little life in their home, and good parents respond to the new duties the new baby brings upon them. Many new parents get to enjoy a touch of the divine but without the hassles of “church”—the new baby, but without the hypocrisy of churchgoers, without the appeals for money, without having to give up Sunday mornings, without the demands that a sovereign God appears to impose.

The birth of most babies comes and goes, leaving parents and everyone else relatively unchanged as the newness yields to sleepless nights, diapers needing to be changed, babies turn into children who don’t remember to say “please” and “thank you” the first 10,000 tries—yet somehow the birth of the baby Jesus continues to move millions of us.

We sing; we entertain; we cook and bake; we take out the boxes in storage and decorate our homes; we try to make contact with old friends; we face long lines and inconveniences to fly across the country to be with family. This baby, born in Bethlehem so long ago, continues to move hundreds of millions of us, centuries later, to celebrate, to try to live in wonder and gratitude, to live differently.

We join those shepherds drawn to the wonder of that baby—and also the songwriters, the worshipers around the world this day from Bethlehem to Balboa Island. We join in giving thanks for the local miracle in the birth of every baby—while also confirming the witness of those shepherds, and the angels who greeted his birth, and that

angel who brought good news of great joy, assuring them “In the city of David was born a Savior, the Christ, the Lord”; we join Mary and Joseph and those who knew Jesus earliest and best. We join in those legions of believers who continue until 2009 to believe that in Jesus the world has been made fundamentally different; the world has been visited by God: “The Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have beheld His glory... full of grace and truth. No one has seen God...but in Jesus He has been revealed.”

But even the birth of the promised Messiah was not enough in itself to change anything important. Most of those people in Bethlehem missed it completely. They were merrymaking in the inn, enjoying their reunions with families, tucking their children in to bed, worrying about how they would pay their taxes—doing what people have always done. But the shepherds were given a “sign”: “this Christ, this newborn baby, you’ll find wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger...” They took off immediately, and their response to the “sign” changed them.

Even today, the birth of the Baby does not automatically change us—even when we’re filled with wonder, filled with gratitude. But even today God is faithful; we have been given all the signs we need if only we, like the shepherds, will go and seek the Messiah, the Lord God. We have been given so many “signs”: the Scriptures, the glory of creation, the wonders of newborn babies, the quiet voice of our conscience, and the sometimes even more quiet whisper of the Holy Spirit. We have been given each other, and many of us have been given the witness of faithful heroes or heroines in the faith who have guided and taught us how to enter into the new kind of life God in Christ has come to offer us.

One thing more: the baby Jesus is of paramount importance to us and to the history of the world, no doubt. But the fact is the baby did not remain a baby, and our allegiance not to that baby but to the living God who came among us, born of Mary. In case we had any doubts, I share with you the prayer over dinner from the movie “Talladega Nights” (I haven’t gotten around to seeing it and probably never will—but I have to laugh at the prayer offered by the recovering race car driver Ricky Bobby:)

The family gathers before dinner; the cameras show

a table piled high with fast food as Ricky Bobby's wife shouts, "Supper's ready, Come on y'all; I've been slaving over this for hours." Ricky Bobby bows his head and prays:

"Dear Lord Baby Jesus, or as our brothers in the South call you, Jesus!...we thank you so much for this bountiful harvest of Domino's, KFC, and the always delicious Taco Bell. I just want to take time to thank you for my family, Dear Lord Baby Jesus, and we thank you for my wife's father, and we hope that you can use your baby Jesus powers to heal him, dear Tiny, Infant Jesus."

At this point his wife interrupts his prayer, to observe "Hey sweetie, Jesus did grow up. You don't always have to call him a baby. It's a bit odd and off-putting to pray to a baby." But Ricky Bobby goes on the offensive. "Look, I like the Christmas Jesus best, and I'm sayin' grace. When you say grace, you can say it to Grownup Jesus or Teenage Jesus or Bearded Jesus or whoever you want." He resumes, unfazed: "Dear Tiny Jesus, in your golden fleece diapers with your tiny, fat, balled up fists..."

At this point Ricky's father-in-law can't contain himself: he blurts out "He was a man! He had a beard!" But Ricky Bobby doesn't give one inch. "Look, I like the baby version the best, you hear me? Dear eight pound six ounce newborn Baby Jesus, don't even know a word yet, just a little infant, so cuddly—but still omnipotent. We'd just like to thank you for all the races I've won. And due to a binding endorsement contract that stipulates I mention PowerAde at each grace, I just wanna say that PowerAde is delicious. Thank you for all your power and your grace, dear Baby God, Amen."

The birth of Jesus is a wonderful event to contemplate, but something's wrong if we worship the baby.

## II "The Event"

We celebrate at Christmas the local birth of the Messiah, Jesus, born in Bethlehem—but we believe that somehow that local birth is also a global birth—a global, universal event. "Good news of great joy for all the people!"—not just the shepherds or the villagers. Jesus' birth is more than a birth.

Hard to imagine much greater contrast: a new baby born to a teenage mother far from her home in a barnyard in a tiny one-stoplight town in the middle of nowhere in one of hundreds of insignificant corners of the mighty Roman Empire. A non-event on the surface of it. Yet many of us believe this baby in diapers is somehow the One whom the angels in heaven adore and salute. This baby who cannot keep his own head from flopping is somehow the One who could command armies across the globe like tokens on a board game. His hand which cannot scratch

an itch on his own nose is the hand which has flung the stars into the heavens.

At Christmas we give thanks for this "God-event" in human history. "No one has ever seen God"—how ever could we, our bodies and minds limited in space and time, understand the mystery and the purpose behind this wonderful world? A decade ago Annie Dillard wrote, "Ten years ago we thought there were two galaxies for each of us alive. Lately, since we use the Hubble Space Telescope, we have revised our figures. There are nine galaxies for each one of us. And each galaxy harbors an average of 100 billion suns. In our galaxy, the Milky Way, there are sixty-nine suns for each person alive. Two galaxies...nine galaxies...sixty-nine suns—these astronomers are nickel-and-diming us to death."

God has been gracious, generous, to give us signs along the way: the Scriptures, the glory of creation and the wonders of newborn babies, the quiet voice of our conscience, the model and mentoring of giants in the faith who have gone before us, and the "still, small" voice of the Holy Spirit. But God has given the world a sign of great joy: God Himself has become human in the Messiah, the Christ. When we could not figure out God, could not figure out how to live with others or even ourselves, when we could not make sense out of this vast and overwhelming cosmos—God came to us, on our terms, in our kind of skin, not to torment us or shout at us or punish us or even simply to give up on us and leave us to ourselves.

God chose to take this awful risk to become a human being—in order to show us all how to live as we were created to live. In Luke's account, we see up through the parting of the heavens to steal a glimpse, and briefly to hear, what things are like on the heavenly side of our earthly reality. But imagine what it would be like from God's side, looking down to earth through that same parting...

God created us human beings with great capacity and high hopes—for fullness, and harmony and joy; for deeply enriching relationships with each other because primarily with God. The story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden reminds us how long that lasted—evidently we humans cannot stand prosperity. Evidently we cannot stand to take orders from anyone, even God, even when our highest happiness and eternal welfare are at stake. Evidently we find it hard to trust anyone outside our selves.

God observed all this with such a heavy heart. He wanted to restore all of us back into right relationship with each other and with Him—yet whatever He offered us we managed to ignore or abuse. He called Abraham

and Sarah, intent upon raising up and shaping a tribe who would be a “light to the nations” and teach others, one day all the world, how to live. Sarah laughed in His face, and Abraham behaved little better.

His people were enslaved in Egypt, and God called Moses to an amazing assignment, then gave him signs along the way until the Israelites were delivered out of slavery Egypt. It took them all of six weeks to be crabbing and complaining about how much better off they were back in chains. God sent the Law, the ten commandments to Moses—again to help us humans quit ruining everything for ourselves down here—and by the time Moses got down from Sinai the people were worshiping the golden calf.

God tried prosperity; under David and Solomon His people prospered—all the more easily to worship false gods and turn their backs on the God who had saved them. God sent prophet after prophet to call them back home again—and still the people ignored the holy prophets, ignored God, and kept getting smashed around, taken over, pillaged, raped, looted and burned—and only a few ever turned to God in earnest.

Whatever God tried to do to help the people, we refused—like a lover who won’t even listen to the apology, won’t even open a love letter of explanation. Like sheep we insisted on going astray, turning our backs on the Good Shepherd and wandering whichever ways we thought best. The more we got slaughtered the more we refused to turn back to God...in fact we blamed God for our difficulties.

Instead of saying, “to hell with all of you down there” and giving us what we wanted, God tried one more bold stratagem. A costly one, and a very risky one—but He was willing to take the risk. He decided to come after us, to become a human being Himself. However brashly we had cursed God and given up, He never gave up on us. The birth of Jesus is God’s trying yet one more time, one more way, to come down from the heavens to remind us who we are, what we were created for.

Pastor Henry Carter writes about Tommy, the frightened little boy hiding and quivering under one of the six beds in his room in the orphanage. It was Christmas Eve, and the five other boys had gone to be with some relatives or other. The change in routine scared Tommy; he was all alone. He would not budge.

The pastor was finally summoned. He spoke to the unseen boy about the Christmas tree downstairs and all the presents around it—no answer. So he dropped to his hands and knees and saw Tommy shaking under the bed. The pastor continued talking, describing the stocking with

Tommy’s name on it filled with treats, then the Christmas Eve dinner they would enjoy later. He could have pulled out the frail Tommy with one arm—but he knew that wasn’t what Tommy needed.

At a loss, the pastor could only think of one thing more to try. He crawled into the space under the bed next to Tommy. He told him again of the bright candles, the pretty wreaths, the tasty treats. Finally he just ran out of things to say. The bedsprings were snagging his jacket and his cheek was resting on the cold hard floor—but he just lay under there and decided to wait, silently.

Pretty soon a small hand found his hand. “You know, Tommy, it’s cold and crowded down here. How about we go out and stand up?” Slowly he and Tommy did.

Tonight we give thanks that God has come down to where we are—even as we remained confused and alone, trying to cope on our own.

### III “The Hope”

The shepherds began that night minding their own business, and their sheep—and ended it glorifying and praising God. They had a new approach to the future as a result of what they had witnessed. “The hopes and fears of all the years are met in Thee tonight” as the song has it.

The darkness that encompasses the world comes in many guises. We see the effects all around us all the time: financial uncertainty; political restlessness, conflict and warfare, terrorism, hunger, nuclear proliferation, etc, etc. Any impartial observer from, say, Mars, might wonder why in the world things have gone so wrong. Why can’t we just all get along?

Because we all recognize life here is fragile, and there are no guarantees. Injury or financial catastrophe or disease or disaster could happen any day. Very few people out there are dedicated to my safety or my well-being. But we have to keep dealing with everyone else. Don’t most of our difficulties come from trying to relate with others? We feel vulnerable, we feel stressed when we feel we need to be in control and keep on top of things. It never stops: “Whatever was he thinking when he said that?” “What will happen when they pass the new health care bill?” “If we don’t pass climate control regulations?” “There are so many crazy drivers out there.” “How safe is this campus—what are the crime statistics?” “What are my odds, Dr.?”

We feel insecure in too many ways, so we compensate. Isn’t this the age-old trouble in Nazareth and the West Bank even today—the Palestinians, the Jews, the Christians, the Arabs are all struggling to try to create a secure future, safe from the hatred or revenge from the

others—arming and struggling to save themselves even when it means killing the other. Isn't this what goes on around the dinner table (or at least in the kitchen) across the land tonight and tomorrow: people give up on their closest relationships, or withhold themselves and their affections due to the anxiety or hurt that comes from trying to live with the other?

God comes among us—but not into a palace with the thickest walls and the biggest guns. Not into some idealized tropical island paradise (if there were such a thing) but into Israel, when tensions were always high between the Jews who lived there and the occupying Roman soldiers. Insurrections and attacks and counterattacks were commonplace.

Jesus did not teach us what we might have preferred to learn: how to invest very successfully, how to eliminate the common cold and flu and other health problems, how to create better weapons. He chooses to be born in the midst of our strife and mistrust. He grows up and talks about the lilies of the field, about not having a home or a place to rest his head. He has no Swiss bank account, no annuity or financial security. He seems to enjoy being here—enjoying His “always slow on the uptake” friends, the many needy who tracked Him down for a favor here, a healing there. He gives Himself entirely to the joys and pleasures in life but also to the risks and the sorrows. We tend to run the other way or withdraw—He waded in even deeper. He prayed to the Father constantly, keeping Himself free from the stress, the darkness and showing us how to do likewise.

Jesus became our hope. We spend so much of our time trying to get what we want; He spent much of His time praying to want what the Father wanted for Him. His disciples then, and we today, suffered from another kind of darkness. If life were a fairy tale, the evil spell would be that we keep forgetting how near, and how caring, and how able is God. His disciples kept forgetting that God is near, God cares about them. So much of Jesus' teaching centered on this one reality: God wants to help; God is not distant or indifferent.

Perhaps they thought Jesus was crazy. They usually couldn't hear the voice of the unseen Father, after all, to which Jesus responded. He kept pounding on this one simple truth: “How could you all have such little faith in God?” They must have wondered sometimes if He weren't crazy, although when the Spirit came and shattered in them that evil spell of disbelief they all became crazy like Jesus was. In His name and for His gospel, they went joyfully to the far corners of the world, cheerfully submitting even to death.

The same darkness, the same evil spell hovers over us today. Was any century more violent or self-destructive than the Twentieth—when much of the world got enough education to think Jesus was naïve, quaint, irrelevant? Was Jesus crazy, or was He simply awake to what is real, and necessary, well before others caught up to Him?

Jesus came as a baby—because He had to start somewhere, just the way we do. But He did not come to be admired or cooed over. He came to be obeyed and followed. He came to bring Light and Hope—first to His disciples, and then through them to all the world. He came to show us how to live more fully alive and more fully engaged—as He was—even in the midst of this perilous life.

Oswald Golter was a missionary agricultural expert in China when the Communists began taking over in 1938. He was held captive until after World War II ended. He was sent a check by his mission board to return home, through India. At the time there were boatloads of Jews who had no place to land—no one would allow them to dock. They were allowed finally to dock, briefly, in one coastal Indian town. Oswald Golter happened to be there, and he saw their condition. It was this time of year. “Merry Christmas,” he cried out to them. “We're Jews,” they told him. “I know. Merry Christmas. What would you like for Christmas?” To get rid of this crazy man they told him, “Oh, we'd love some German pastry.”

Oswald went and cashed his check and scoured through that town in India and found a bakery which made German pastry. He bought rack after rack and arranged to have it taken to those Jewish refugees who had no place to go. Years later a friend asked him, “Mr Golter, why did you do that? They're not even Christians!”

Oswald Golter nodded. “Yes, I know. But I am.”

I am. You are. Go forth in hope.