

“Bonded in Love”
Isaiah 9:2-7 Titus 2:11-14 Luke 2:1-20

The birth of a baby is always a miracle. It is a moment of intimate love. This past Labor Day weekend we were travelling up to Amish country in Pennsylvania. We were going to rendezvous with my brother and sister at the Washington DC Airport and drive up together. On our flight from Atlanta to Washington we were sitting beside a young man in military uniform. He seemed especially intense. During the flight we talked with him. He had been serving in Afghanistan and was flying home to be with his wife, who was expecting their fifth child. She didn't know that he was coming home, and in fact, she was already at the hospital so when he landed he was being picked up and taken directly to the hospital to be with his wife when she gave birth. I hope he made it on time.

Timing means a lot in giving birth. One friend has shared with us that her pregnancy had some complications and her doctor gave her this formula: for every day she could remain pregnant it would save her three days in the hospital after giving birth. The other side of that coin is that when it is time, it is time, and a delayed delivery can also cause difficulties. Timing is very important, and being present at a birth is one of the most wondrous experiences there is in life.

I am so grateful that I was present at the birth of our son, at the birth of our daughter, and the day after the birth of our grandson. I am certain that each of you has your own experiences to treasure.

This appreciation of timing has given me a slightly different perspective of how Luke tells of the birth of Jesus. I have always heard it as one scene happening after another, that is Mary gave birth to Jesus and placed him in the manger, and then right after that we hear about the angel appearing to the shepherds and telling them to go see this new baby that has been born in a manger.

But I think a closer listening to this story has some indications that both these actions, Mary giving birth and the angel appearing to the shepherds happened more or less simultaneously. In other words, Gabriel's appearance to the shepherds was happening at the same time as Mary was giving birth, so the sudden appearance of the angelic choir to the shepherds was a precisely timed spontaneous outpouring of the joy of God. And when we hear that the shepherds went "with haste" to find the child it means that they would have arrived very shortly after Jesus was born.

Not only is God's sense of timing precise but remember, this story is being told by Luke who is also a physician. Luke knows the significance of timing. Babies are not born asleep; they are born wide awake and intently alert.

One very special gift we have this year in our church is this specially made nativity scene. I am very grateful for it. Tonight, you can see for the first time the baby Jesus. He's pretty small but I was looking at him earlier in the week. One thing I really like

about this baby Jesus is that he is wide awake, his eyes are wide open. We know that newborns typically are for the first hour or so after their birth.

I found this description of a newborn's first hour: "At first, your newborn baby enters a quiet alert state, where he or she is cuddly and still. He looks into his mother's eyes and touches her hand. He can listen to his parent's voice. All of his energy is channeled into seeing and hearing. In this alert state your newborn takes in his surroundings, and begins to get used to his environment. If a newborn baby remains in close contact with his mother, the quiet alert state will last longer. This is a precious time."¹

Think about God's timing here. This purpose of this time of alertness right after birth is for a baby to be intimately bonded with the people most present and the child's immediate environment. So, from his very birth Jesus was intimately bonded with those who are displaced, those who feel they don't quite fit in, those who are considered throw away people, all of the "un" people, the unacceptable, the unclean, the unemployed, the uninsured, the undocumented, the unloved, the uninvited, all of the "un" people.

The message of the angel is that this child is good news of great joy for all people, especially the "un" people. Think about the people grouped around this new born child. In order to be fully present each one of them had needed to let go and be emptied. Joseph had been challenged to let go of his traditional ideas of righteousness; he had to be open to appearing to condone unrighteousness. Mary had been asked to let go of her outward ideas of purity, an unmarried mother was considered unpure. The shepherds had been asked to let go of their fears and to have the courage to be open to the unknown. God had timed all of this with great precision.

Tonight I ask you, what time is it in your life? No matter what the awkwardness of your circumstances, God's gift to each one of you is Emmanuel. Sometimes we are stuck in the habits and patterns of procrastination and delay saying, "I'm not ready," "the timing is not right," "can't we do this some other time?" The miracle of the birth of Jesus tells us that where there is surrender, God's love will be born and will bond with our deepest self.

This evening we are celebrating communion together. In other settings during this season we will all be sharing in feasting of many different menus, but this meal we share in worship is different in its simplicity. It is the symbol of the full expression of God's love.

I love seeing all the expressions of generosity at this season of the year, but in the midst of all of this I don't want us to miss our deepest need to love and be loved as God loves us.

I heard about a group of people that were delivering gifts to an orphanage on Christmas Day. It was a scene of great celebration and great joy, but one volunteer noticed that

¹ From www.aboutkidshealth.com, "States of Alertness"

there was one little girl quietly standing off to the side. He asked the orphanage director about the little girl. "Oh, bless her heart," the director replied, "she just came to us a few weeks ago. Both of her parents were killed in an automobile accident, and there was no other family to take her in. So she is here."

The volunteer went over to the little girl and gently he said to her, "It's Christmas morning and we have wonderful Christmas presents here: toys, clothes, candy, food, books, puzzles. Which would you like? What do you want most for Christmas?" And the little girl said, "I want somebody to hold me."

Isn't that the best gift of all, to know that we are held in love? Every time we share communion it is a full expression that in Jesus Christ, God came to be with us and to be deeply bonded in love within us. And in that love God is relying on us to be his arms to hold one another. Merry Christmas!

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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