

“Nothing to See Here”

A friend of mine tells the story about a Christmas when he was a young father and a young priest. Despite his wife’s concerns, he took his infant son with him on the night before Christmas Eve to his inner-city parish church. It was a safe part of town, so he was not worried. Yet, when he was walking up the street toward the rear entrance to the church, he noticed a small group of men hanging out on the stoop of a closed business. He considered crossing the street but did not. As he approached the men, one said, “What have you got there, reverend?” The other two men gathered around the father and son. That is when he became apprehensive.

These guys were bundled up against the cold, but it was clear their clothes were hand-me-downs. Even outdoors and in the cold, they carried the rank odor of the street. My friend realized these were guys who came to the weekly meals for the homeless at his church. Still, being surrounded by them in the dark did not feel safe. He knew his wife would be furious if she realized that he had brought their little baby boy into this fraught situation. But there he was. What was he to do?

Yet he did not need to be concerned, because what the men wanted to do was admire the baby boy. They wiggled his toes. They let the baby grab their fingers the way babies do. They wanted to hold the boy, and he let them. It was not a moment of foreboding or danger. It was a moment of complete joy. These men, whose lives were on the street, were delighted to get to do something that felt life-affirming and hopeful.

On this Christmas Eve, we remember another boy born two millennia ago. We heard his birth described in the reading from Luke’s Gospel. There is the disappointment of not being able to find lodgings, but the willingness to hole up in a stable. There are angels that speak to shepherds “abiding in the fields by night.” The heralding angels scare them half to death. But the shepherds receive “good tidings of great joy.” They decide to follow the angel’s instructions and go to Bethlehem, and apparently leave their flocks unattended. The potential for great joy was too compelling to miss.

We do not know if the shepherds’ appearance at the stable caused concern, the way the men on the street did for the young father. Most representations of the scene show the shepherds kneeling at a little distance from the manger. But what if they did adore the baby Jesus the way the homeless men adored the priest’s child? Wouldn’t that be natural? I prefer that image. He may be God incarnate, but he is also Emmanuel—God among us. We should not be afraid to touch him and even cradle him in our arms.

The two births are quite similar apart from the angels and shepherds. How extraordinary that the birth of the Son of God should be so similar to the

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birth of every other child in this world. The setting was different, but like most babies, his birth happened in the traditional way. There was crying. There was adoration. There was feeding by a tired but loving mother. Both mothers would keep these special moments in their hearts. The baby would later sleep. The night sky would fade into complete darkness. The sun would rise on the new family, and life would go on just as it did for families in Judea in the first century or in Knoxville in the 20th century.

We tend to notice the remarkable in Luke's story—the angels, the manger, the attending shepherds. But what is most remarkable is the unremarkable. Holiness breaks into the world just like any other baby. God does not break into the world with the pageantry of empire. God's birth is not announced on news broadcasts as are modern royal babies. There is no betting on this child's name. It is all quite normal, quite regular, quite quiet, and quite natural.

Despite the grandeur and pomposity that the Church has layered onto the story of Jesus, his birth was like any other. That is how it must be. It is what God wanted. Divinity would no longer be distant and unrelatable. The Divine was here. And each year, the Holy is reborn in our hearts if we let it.

As the 16th-century mystic Angelus Silesius wrote, "If in your heart you make a manger for his birth. Then God will once again become a child on earth." And I think that is beautiful.