

## Christmas Passion

People are forgetful. We forget where we put our keys, we forget appointments, we forget to return phone calls. Some even forget or perhaps never really knew what today's celebration is about, even good Christians. A poll conducted by Lutherans some time ago found that the largest percentage of Christians interviewed said that Christmas was all about families getting together, exchanging gifts and sharing a wonderful meal with lots of amazing desserts. Well, that's all well and good, but what about Christmas being about Jesus?

Even those who did mention Christmas as the birth of Christ, tended to focus on the wrong things. They focused on the sentimentality of Christmas: the appealing baby in the manger, the crèche, the tableau of soft sweetness. Not one in a thousand, not one in a million, and not most of us here would zone in on the one word – probably a surprising word, an unexpected word, that the Bible, the Church and tradition tell us is at the heart of Christmas, a word we have forgotten or never really associated with Christmas.

That word is not sweetness, softness, gentleness. That word is **passion** – not a word we would normally associate with Christmas. Yet passion is written all over the Christmas scene. But, what we don't have in Christmas is sweetness and softness and gentleness. What we do have this Christmas night, is plain, unadulterated, hard, raw passion. We all know that there's a cuddly baby, some cute lambs, a mother singing lullabies, but behind that facade, behind the tenderness, is a fierce and a passionate God, and that seldom comes across in the sentimental pageantry of the manger.

Take a second look. The Christmas message and the Christmas celebration centers around God's great love for us, the commitment not to leave us abandoned, not to leave us in the darkness of political, social, or personal tyrannies.

The message of Christmas is summed up in that communication made by the angel to Mary at the Annunciation, "You shall call his name Jesus and he shall be known as Emmanuel, which translates to 'God with us'." Yes, God with us, or in the reverential phrase of John's Gospel, "And the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us."

Why? Why? Why does God want to dwell among us? Because, simply put, the object of all love is union: to be with the beloved. So, whatever it is, God has a thing for us, a passion. The real Christmas memory, then, is not that of a passive, seductive Baby Jesus, but rather of an active, desiring God. Christmas is about a driving desire on God's part "to dwell among us", to be a part of the human condition. God loves us that much. God yearns for us that much. And that's passion.

Luke's story of Jesus' birth reflects the difficult lives of the majority of people in first century Israel and throughout the Roman Empire. Roman oppression surrounded them and affected how their lives unfolded.

This beautifully written account has inspired countless hymns, liturgies, works of art, and nearly every celebration of Jesus' advent. This story is much more than an eloquently told, romantic tale about Jesus' birth that

resources our Christmas programs, nativity scenes, and holiday cards. Luke wrote this story, and Luke's first readers would have heard it, as a bold, outlandish, passionate, even dangerous tale, about one whose birth shakes the very foundations of the world and whose life challenges all claims to power and authority. Without question it's a story about passion.

Perhaps a story, a story about a baby will help us to understand this love more clearly. It's told by the baby's mother. Listen to the mother's story:

*"It was Sunday, Christmas Day. Our family had spent the holiday in San Francisco with my husband's parents, but in order for us to be back at work on Monday, we found ourselves driving the 400 miles back home to Los Angeles on Christmas Day. We stopped for lunch in King City. The restaurant was nearly empty. We were the only family, and ours were the only children.*

*I heard Erik, my one-year-old, squeal with glee. "Hithere", the two words he always thought were one. "Hithere", and he pounded his fat baby hands – whack, whack, whack – on the metal high chair. His face was alive with excitement, his eyes were wide, gums bared in a toothless grin. He wriggled and giggled, and then I saw the source of his merriment. And my eyes could not take it in all at once.*

*A tattered rag of a coat, obviously bought by someone else eons ago, dirty, greasy, and worn; baggy pants; spindly body; toes that poked out of would-be shoes; a shirt that had ring-around-the-collar all over; and a face like none*

*other – gums as bare as Erik’s. “Hi there, baby. Hi there, big boy. I see ya, Buddy.” My husband and I exchanged a look that was a cross between “What do we do?” and “Poor devil.”*

This “poor devil’s” story takes us back to the shepherds’ situation in the story of the Holy Birth. Enlivened by the message of Jesus’ birth and welcome to the Nativity, the shepherds’ place is crucial to the story. They were there to bear witness to a heavenly revelation. These shepherds were the bums, the “poor devils”, in their time and story.

The shepherds may have been less clean and malodorous than the stable where the baby was born. Shepherding was considered a despised occupation in this world. They kept sheep in the Judean desert around Bethlehem where available water had to be used primarily for drinking by both people and sheep, so there was little left for hygiene and even less for the ritual purity act which defined faithfulness for the Jews.

They also would have been poorer and less socially acceptable even than peasants like Joseph and Mary. The shepherds were on the bottommost rung of the social ladder.

No one would have wanted to share a meal with them or a social exchange, or even to be seen with them, not unlike the family in the restaurant and the “poor devil.” The mother continues the story:

*“Our meal came, and the banging and the noise continued. Now the old bum was shouting across the room. “Do you know patty cake? Atta boy. Do you*

*know peek-a-boo? Hey look! He knows peek-a-boo!” Erik continued to laugh and answer, “Hithere.” Every call was echoed. Nobody thought it was cute. The guy was a drunk and a disturbance. I was embarrassed. My husband, Dennis, was humiliated. Eve, our six-year-old, said, “Why is that old man talking so loud?”*

*Dennis went to pay the cheque, imploring me to get Erik and meet him in the parking lot. “Lord, just let me get out of here before he speaks to me or Erik”, and I bolted for the door. It soon was obvious that both the Lord and Erik had other plans.*

*As I drew closer to the man, I turned my back, walking to sidestep him and any air that he might be breathing. As I did so, Erik, all the while with his eyes riveted to his best friend, leaned over my arms, reaching up with both arms in a baby’s ‘pick-me-up’ position. In a split-second of balancing my baby and turning to counter his weight, I came eye-to-eye with the old man.*

*Erik was lunging for him, arms spread wide. The bum’s eyes both asked and implored, “Would you let me hold your baby?” There was no need for me to answer since Erik propelled himself from my arms to the man. Suddenly a very old man and a very young baby consummated their love relationship.*

*Erik laid his tiny head upon the man’s ragged shoulder. The man’s eyes closed, and I saw tears pooling beneath the lashes. His aged hands, full of grime and pain and hard labour, gently, so gently, cradled my baby’s bottom and stroked his back. I stood awestruck.*

*The old man rocked and cradled Erik in his arms for a moment, and then his eyes opened and set squarely on mine. He said in a firm, commanding voice, “You take care of this baby.” And somehow I managed, “I will”, from a throat that contained a stone. I wonder if any of the shepherds might have considered or wanted to hold the Holy Babe, the one the angels sent them to see.*

*The bum pried Erik from his chest, unwillingly, longingly, as though he was in pain. I held my arms open to receive my baby, and again the man addressed me: “God bless you, Ma’am. You’ve given me my Christmas gift”. I said nothing more than a muttered “thanks”. With Erik in my arms, I ran for the car. Dennis wondered why I was crying and holding Erik so tightly. And why I was saying, “My God, forgive me. Forgive me”.*

I would like to suggest that the real meaning of Christmas is in this story. Simply put, Erik is God. Simply put, the bum is us. Erik is God’s yearning and passion for us tattered bums with our tattered lives, our tattered hurts, our tattered relationships, and our tattered sins. Erik is two arms determined to hug us. Erik is a fierce little baby who makes no distinctions but would embrace the least likely – you and me. And the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us.

And that’s what Christmas is about. It’s an enormously unrelenting kind of a feast. It is not sentimentality. It is not soft. It is not sweet Baby Jesus. Christmas is a volatile Erik. So, when you look at the manger, no cooing baby there. Only love satisfied. This is why this is the most important reason to

celebrate Christmas.

If God is not with us and if God has not embraced our tattered lives, woe is us. There is no hope. And there is no light, only darkness and despair. And maybe we are here this evening out of fruitless socializing, pressured routine, or empty sentimentality. But if we are here because of love and we are here like the rag-tag shepherds that we are, to kneel and rejoice, then we have caught Christmas' meaning: Emmanuel, the passionate God, has had his way and has hugged us most fiercely. A Blessed and most passionate Christmas to you all.

**Amen.**