

# *Stop Looking in the Church for a Baby*

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## **4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Advent**

Matthew 1:18-25

*“She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus...”*

We're very good at separating our church life with our worldly life. Think about this for a moment: what's the first thing you do when you get home from church? Maybe some of you sit down and reflect on the sermon and scripture readings. Maybe some of you take some time to pray to God about the service. Maybe others of you run to change out of the nice “church” clothes and don the relaxing feel of jeans and a casual shirt. It is an effort to shake off the garnish of the church. In all honesty, that is the first thing I do after a Sunday morning service. I change out of my suit to my relaxing worn out and worn down clothes. And think about this, as you are changing your clothes, as you remove the nice, church garments are you removing the church as well? Are you placing the spiritual part of the day in the closet for the next week and returning to the worn out, sometimes worn down, and real lived experience of life? Maybe you aren't, but there is a pervasive trend in our society to separate the holy with the real.

We have compartmentalized the holy and the real, and have kept the two apart. This goes beyond the separation of church and state, and has become the separation of the divine and the carnal. The theologian John Howard Yoder describes a stance of the church as the conversionist church, which strives to be completely separate from the culture, having no interaction at all with the world – the Amish are an extreme example of this church. We find this divide when religion is brought up in work, in school, with our friends, and we shyly turn the other way to avoid the conversation. We talk about God at church, we talk about work at work, and never the twain shall meet. Like two worlds co-existing the church and the world are side by side and we find ourselves in one or the other. We are very good at separating our spiritual life with our worldly life.

At Christmas there is an effort to bridge the divide between the secular and the sacred, but it never seems to go all the way. After all, this is the most wonderful time of the year. After all, we do make our houses look prettier with all of the lights and other adornments. After all, we do wear religious, or semi religious, symbols via Santa hats or in red and green colors, and see these symbols in stores everywhere. After all, we see religious altars and lawn ornaments depicting a sacred event in our neighbor's lawn, and in our lawn. There is an urge to bridge the sacred event that is going to happen with the world... but we just don't seem to go all the way.

When we decorate our homes, the emphasis falls on the house with the most lights, not on the effort to create a sacred atmosphere in the secular. When we wear our “holiday” clothing the emphasis falls more on emulating St. Nicholas than on the Holy Family. The one place in society that bridges the divine gap is the “Charlie Brown Christmas Special.” There the secular and the sacred are brought into one through the guise of a beagle dancing on a piano and a blanket dependent child reciting the Christmas story. Yet we mostly fall short, feel awkward, or miss the point when trying to bridge the holy gap in the Christmas season. The great Christian writer C.S. Lewis once commented to a friend in a letter, “Just a hurried line...to tell a story which puts the contrast between *our* feast of the Nativity and all this ghastly ‘Xmas’ racket at its lowest. My brother heard a woman on a ‘bus say as the ‘bus passed a church with a Crib outside it, ‘O Lord! They bring religion into everything. Look – they’re dragging it even into Christmas now!’” ( From *Letters to an American Lady* [29 December 1958], p. 80). Do you see? There is an

urging, there is a desire, but something holds us back from fully embracing the divine and the secular in all aspects of our life. At Christmas there is an effort to bridge the divide between the secular and the sacred, but it never seems to go all the way.

Yet the act of the birth itself is a merging of the holy and the earthly, setting the tone for the whole ministry of Christ as God incarnate. God has taken the two worlds and superimposed them, one on top of the other. The fully human Jesus is the fully divine God and in that the secular and the sacred are one. The experiences of the world are experienced by Christ incarnate, and the secular and sacred are one. The human life that you and I live, the basic struggles we endure, the suffering and joys we feel, will be lived, endured, and felt by Christ the living God, and the secular and sacred are one. Look at what is happening in the passage we read today from Matthew. Joseph and Mary are engaged, and have not yet moved in together to make the marriage final. But Mary is pregnant, and the law requires that Joseph break his engagement with Mary. Yet Joseph does not want to bring such shame to his wife-to-be. This is the kind of mess that soap operas are made from! Mary is at Joseph's mercy, Joseph is torn between the justice of the law and the compassion of his heart, and we do not know who the father is. At the height of the domestic turmoil, God intervenes. God takes the mess, the real, lived experience and makes it holy. From this mess you will have a son, conceived by the Holy Spirit (imagine that DNA test!), who shall be the savior of the world. Joseph is even told to give the boy an ordinary name, Jesus, and God will take that ordinary name and make it holy – Jesus will become what it means, he will save his people!

This is the ministry for which we are preparing this Advent season, God walking, living and being amongst us as one of us. The holy and the worldly divides are broken through the birth, and the life of Jesus Christ. In one of his Christmas sermons, Martin Luther remarked, "How could God have shown his goodness in a more sublime manner than by humbling himself to partake of flesh and blood...?" (From *The Complete Sermons of Martin Luther*, vol. 1, p. 141). And in that sublime manner the holy and the earthly are merged, setting the tone for the whole ministry of Christ as God incarnate.

Can we take that leap of faith?

Can we recognize the mix of the divine and the real in the baby Jesus, and can we recognize the mix of the divine and the carnal in all of life? Can you leave these walls, and still see God in the everyday process of life? Can you leave these walls and imagine that the church is growing to surround the entire world? Can you leave these walls and imagine that worship is continuing as you drive home, as you change your clothes, and as you watch the afternoon football game? How can we see the divine in the real? Here is a hint, look for the obvious. Don't look in the church for a baby, look in the maternity ward, look in the nursery, look in the new mother's arms, and for the least of our society, look in the stable. There you will find the merging of the divine and the secular that occurs with Jesus. Babies aren't born here; they are born in the world.

It is in the everyday human interactions that you experience the divine. In the great short story, *Revelation* by Flannery O'Connor, the main character, Mrs. Turpin is sitting in a doctor's waiting room, talking about how fortunate she is because God created her special. And in the midst of racial, social and any other kind of back-handed southern complement, a young woman, educated at one of those liberal colleges like Bryn Mawr, throws a book at her:

"The book struck her directly over her left eye. It struck almost at the same instant that she realized the girl was about to hurl it. Before she could utter a sound, the raw face came crashing across the table toward her, howling. The girl's fingers sank like clamps into the soft flesh of her neck.... (immediately after the incident) Mrs. Turpin's head cleared and her power

of motion returned. She leaned forward until she was looking directly into the fierce brilliant eyes. There was no doubt in her mind that the girl did know her, knew her in some intense and personal way, beyond time and place and condition. ‘What you got to say to me?’ she asked hoarsely and held her breath, waiting, as for a revelation.

“The girl raised her head. Her gaze locked with Mrs. Turpin’s. ‘Go back to hell where you cam from, you old wart hog,’ she whispered.”

Shaken by the event, Mrs. Turpin finds herself that evening washing her pigs, because even her pigs are clean, and yelling at God over the event. It was at that moment when she saw and experienced the divine, the revelation that God is among the least, the dirty, and the forgotten.

Through an incident in a doctor’s office, and while washing pigs, the divine and the secular are merged in O’Connor’s masterful writing. How often has this happened to us? How often have we been confronted and changed through a seemingly ordinary interaction in life. A man on the street, a woman in the store, and a child in the park, all are reminders of the presence of God. It is a sacred consciousness that we are called to develop, (this is what the Catholic sociologist Andrew Greeley called a Sacramental Imagination) a realizing that Christ walked among us in the flesh, was born into a family, and lived a life that we all live. The sacred and the secular are not separate but one. Can you walk in both worlds at the same time? Can you be aware of God’s presence in the church and outside the church... even in the most base of times and experiences? It is an act of letting go. We can’t force the divine, but we can’t run from it either. It is like holding a newborn baby. As we look into the baby’s eyes, as we feel its warm body against ours, we are changed despite ourselves. In that same way, we must take life into our arms, and allow ourselves to experience, allow us to feel the divine, and allow ourselves to be changed. Can we recognize the mix of the divine and the real in the baby Jesus, and can we recognize the mix of the divine and the carnal in all of life?

Let us allow the physical and the spiritual aspects of the arts begin to open our eyes and ears to the holy and the earthly, the sacred and the secular of the birth of God. In the arts we can experience the reality and the divine all in one. Think about what is happening when you hear a great piece of music, be it country, rock, jazz, classical, or rap. If it is great you are moved in one way or another. What is happening but you are connecting with the divine, with the greater human experience, with the glory of God’s creation. There is a story of Leonard Bernstein after he conducted one of Mahler’s symphonies. Mahler, a man who experienced so much loss, and captured his experience in his music, captured Bernstein, one of our greatest conductors of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. After the performance, Bernstein was found in his dressing room, with his head in his hands, tears streaming down his cheeks. All he could say was that he lost himself in the music – he was a part of the music, the experience, and of God.

And when we sing the time tested Christmas carols, does not the same happen to us. Whether we are belting out “Joy to the World” or whispering “Silent Night” acappella, there is something powerful and something transforming in the event. Can you imagine yourself with the heavenly host as you sing, “Joy to the World?” Can you feel the relief and exhaustion of Mary and Joseph after delivering the baby Jesus and finally getting some rest as you take part in the chorus of “Silent Night?” Do you hear the harkening of the shepherds as you sing “O Come All Ye Faithful?” The sounds, the act of singing, the power of the music takes us out of our reality and allows us to experience the divine in a true and holy way.

Or think of a Rockwell painting (or any other great work of art). You stare at a boy and a grandmother sitting at a table, head bowed in prayer, while the mill workers look over at them with curiosity from the next table. Emotions well up as you look and remember your childhood.

Emotions well up as you imagine the courage of a grandmother and child. Emotions well up as you consider the missed or lived opportunities that you have faced as well. The world and the divine are in that moment combined and the incarnation is experienced. The Catholic theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar considered the arts as the form through which the divine was known. Through the aesthetic beauty would God be experienced in worship and in the world.

So today we are given an exercise to experience the incarnation in the here and now with the music. Today we are urged to let go and experience the divine in the flesh and know that the holy is among us and around us. Today we are invited to become a part of the music, to become a part of the divine experience and begin to understand what it means for God to be born. This is God's world, created and loved by God. When we begin to understand and begin to experience what it means that God is born a human then we will begin to understand what it means for that same God to create us and love us.

In these next couple of days, allow yourself to let go and experience the music. Allow yourself to become a part of the Christmas experience. Allow yourself to find the baby Jesus in all the aspects of life. Christ is born – Hallelujah!