

Date: 24 December 2003

**OCCASION:** Christmas Eve

**SERMON: To Us, A Child is Born**

Text(s): Isaiah 9:2,6-7; Hebrews 1:1-4; Luke 2:1-7

© 2003 L. R. Kalajainen

In a classic old movie about the Anzio landings on the west coast of Italy, one of the bloodier battles of World War II, there is a scene that is particularly touching. The allied troops have been pinned against the beach for days on end by fierce German artillery fire. Their casualties are heavy; it looks as though there is little hope of their getting off the beach and inland past the small village where they are sheltering behind the rubble of bombed out houses. The situation is desperate and the men are losing hope of either rescue or a turn in the tide of battle. Some civilians remain in the ruins of the village as well, one of them a young woman who is in her last stages of pregnancy and simply could not join the others in the village who fled at the beginning of the invasion. The soldiers are trying to find what shelter they can behind the house where the young woman is being tended by some older members of the village.

The shells are falling, the meager cover under which the soldiers are hiding is being blasted to rubble, and suddenly in the interval between explosions, they hear the cry of a newborn baby coming from the windows of the house. Immediately these dirty, coarse, frightened, and desperate soldiers pause and listen, and then smiles start to break out on their faces. In the midst of the violence and death of war, they hear the squall of new life. And somehow, in the midst of their desperation, the hope breaks in that puts all the violence and suffering in perspective. Life is stronger than death; love, the sort of love that produces a child is stronger than the violence that human beings inflict on one another. The cry of a helpless, vulnerable infant is a sign of hope, a small beacon of light that begins to push back their terror even if for a few moments. And they take courage to hold on a bit longer until relief arrives.

The prophet Isaiah, in a similarly desperate moment in the history of the kingdom of Judah, eight centuries before Christ, in the face of an enemy invasion, proclaimed that God would send a sign of hope, a sign that if it were understood, would signal God's faithfulness to his people even in the midst of tough times. *"The Lord himself will give you a sign; a young woman shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel . . . before he knows how to distinguish*

*good from evil, the land before whose two kings you are in dread will be deserted. . . for to us a child is born, to us a son is given. And the government shall be upon his shoulders, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace. Of his government and peace there will be no end."*

After last Sunday's performance of the Messiah, most of us have that text imprinted in our memory, I suspect. Isaiah could hardly have known that his proclamation of the birth of a child as a sign of God's continuing faithfulness to his people would have such a far-reaching impact, or that nearly three thousand years later, there would be groups of people like those of us gathered here tonight, who would read that old text, hear those old words, and think of the birth of another child, a child born in Bethlehem, a child who has become for millions, a sign of that same continuing faithfulness of God, a faithfulness that has not yet given up on our race, but continues to bring hope in the midst of violence and death.

Certainly the presence of war and violent death is still with us, no less so than in Isaiah's day or in the days of Jesus' birth. No promised utopia has yet arisen to replace the regimes of violence and suffering they cause that is our human lot. There appear to be few curbs on the violence that powerful men and governments wreak upon the world. In order to curb the murderous megalomania of Saddam Hussein, we resorted to violence on an even grander scale. Months later, despite the fact that Saddam has, in the past week or two become a minor footnote in the long history of fallen tyrants, violent attacks by and against our forces and the civilians who end up being "collateral damage" continue to dominate the news and depress our spirits. And Iraq is only the most visible and immediate evidence of Death's continuing hold on us. Bethlehem, the very city we sing about as the birthplace of the Prince of Peace is even now a place devastated by suicide bombers and aggressive military reactions.

Whatever else the birth of a child means, whether it was the child born during King Ahaz's reign, or the child born in Bethlehem, or the birth of any child today, it does not mean the world has become a friendlier, more hospitable place for human life. There is nothing more fragile than a baby, nothing more vulnerable or helpless, as well as more hopeful. The birth of a child may be a sign, but signs are, by definition, ambiguous. They have to be read and interpreted and acted upon for their true meaning to become apparent.

When we first began driving in France we had to learn the meaning of a lot of signs that were new to us. Except in the cities, intersections of several roads in France are almost never controlled by traffic lights, but rather by traffic circles or roundabouts. And on the approach to a roundabout there are always several signs telling you which direction to take to get to the place you want to go. But at each roundabout, there is also always one sign that struck us as very funny, but which, after we learned to read it properly, was the one we always looked for first. It's a sign that says, "*Toutes directions*"— "all directions." I understood the words well enough; but I had to learn through experience, that, for the purposes of driving, it didn't mean simply "All directions," but rather "all *other* directions than those that are specified in the other signs at the intersection." The learning process involved several wrong turns, several times getting lost, or several times going round and round the traffic circle before figuring out the road we were supposed to take, but eventually, we learned how to use that sign so that it did signify something meaningful and helpful.

So it is with the sign of the Christ child in the manger. The birth of a child in Bethlehem two thousand years ago is only a sign to those who learn how to read it, and who then allow their lives to be guided by it. In one sense, the birth of Jesus is no different than the birth of any other baby. The birth of any child is a sign of the power of life to continue, to break into the world of violence and destructive human actions.

But in another sense, if Jesus' birth means what we Christians claim that it means, that God is present with us in such a way that we can that we can find our way to a future where justice will replace oppression and peace will overcome the destructive violence of war, then we will have to learn how to read that birth as a sign of that presence. And that learning process will involve getting behind the wheel, figuratively speaking, and choosing a direction in which to drive. We will have to set our lives on a certain course, make certain choices about what is real, what is valuable, what is of first priority. We will have to behave in certain ways, and refrain from behaving in certain other ways. For part of that learning process involves discovering that the birth of Christ does not mean that all ways are equally valid or equally likely to get us to the promised land of peace and justice. Like the sign *Toutes directions*, it doesn't

simply mean all directions or any direction at all, but rather points us in a specific direction to the exclusion of other alternatives.

So, for example, to read the sign of Jesus' birth as a saving sign will mean that we cannot choose the road that puts material gain ahead of human community and solidarity as the fundamental reality of life. Nor the road that equates success with truth. Nor the road where power rather than servanthood or sacrificial love beckons as the means to achieve our desired ends. For how could a birth in a stable, signal that wealth is what we should be questing for? How could a birth whose end was a life cut short on a cross signal that success is the goal toward which we should be striving? How could a child born to a peasant woman and attended by humble shepherds point toward power as the way to achieve our goals.

No, to read the sign correctly involves developing a certain kind of vision, putting on different lenses. Those lenses, that vision, is the work of faith. It is faith that enabled those war-weary soldiers at Anzio to hear a newborn's cry as a sign of hope from which they took courage to hold on a bit longer. It is faith that enabled St. Luke to peer back beyond the disaster of the crucifixion to the birth of Jesus and say, "*To you is born this day in the city of David a Savior who is the Messiah, the Lord.*" It is faith that enabled the writer to the Hebrews, to reflect on the struggles of his community in the midst of persecution and war, and say, "*in these last days, God has spoken to us by a Son.*" It is faith that enables us, in the midst of our struggles, to take courage to go on in hope as well.

Faith in what? Faith in a God whose will for his creation is good, and whose solidarity with us may be seen in a child born in a manger and in a man hanging on a cross. Faith in ourselves as God's children, created in love and for love. Faith in one another as those who are given to us as companions so that we are never left alone, abandoned to our lonely fate. Faith in the future that we grasp by hope in life that is stronger than death.

In 1994 two American Christian educators were invited to Russia by the Department of Education to teach morals and ethics (based on biblical principles) in the public schools. They were also invited to teach in prisons, in the police and fire departments, and in a large state-run

orphanage, where over 100 abandoned, and often abused children, were housed.

In the orphanage, they told the story of Christmas to children who were hearing it for the first time. As they told of Mary and Joseph and their long journey, being turned away from the inn because there was no room, and having to find shelter in the stable with the animals, the children were fascinated.

They had the children construct a manger scene with bits of yellow paper cut into strips for straw, and a baby cut from some brown felt, and a baby blanket from scraps of an old flannel nightgown. As the children were busy constructing their nativity scenes, the teacher went from table to table to see how they were doing. Listen to her own words as she tells of one particular child's experience.

*The orphans were busy assembling their manger as I walked among them to see if they needed any help. All went well until I got to one table where little Misha sat. He looked to be about 6 years old and had finished his project. As I looked at the little boy's manger, I was startled to see not one, but two babies in the manger. Quickly, I called for the translator to ask the lad why there were two babies in the manger. Crossing his arms in front of him and looking at this completed manger scene, the child began to repeat the story very seriously.*

*For such a young boy, who had only heard the Christmas story once, he related the happenings accurately— until he came to the part where Mary put the baby Jesus in the manger. Then Misha started to ad-lib. He made up his own ending to the story as he said, "And when Maria laid the baby in the manger, Jesus looked at me and asked me if I had a place to stay. I told him I have no mamma and I have no papa, so I don't have any place to stay. Then Jesus told me I could stay with him. But I told him I couldn't, because I didn't have a gift to give him like everybody else did. But I wanted to stay with Jesus so much, so I thought about what I had that maybe I could use for a gift. I thought maybe if I kept him warm, that would be a good gift.*

*So I asked Jesus, 'If I keep you warm, will that be a good enough gift?' And Jesus told me, 'If you keep me warm, that will be the best gift anybody*

*ever gave me.' So I got into the manger, and then Jesus looked at me and he told me I could stay with him— for always."*

*As little Misha finished his story, his eyes brimmed full of tears that splashed down his little cheeks. Putting his hand over his face, his head dropped to the table and his shoulders shook as he sobbed and sobbed. The little orphan had found someone who would never abandon nor abuse him, someone who would stay with him— FOR ALWAYS.*

To us a child is born; to us a son is given. To us.  
.. for always.