

December 24/25, Nativity (Luke 2:1-14)

Luke has some sense of how a baby can change everything.

November 15, 2017

As the commercial starts, sliding hospital doors open to reveal a man and woman; he is holding a baby carrier. “Thirty-six hours ago,” says the voiceover, “you were Jeff and Susan. Now you’re Mom and Dad.” The new parents look nervous and tender enough to tug the heartstrings of anyone who has come home with a baby. The viewer may chuckle, remembering how many things a new parent does not know; or the viewer may tear up at the stunned expression on the new dad’s face when the backup camera brings his attention to a passing car.

A friend recalls her surprise that the hospital let her simply walk out the door with her new son. That feeling of amazement had not passed when it was time for his first appointment with the pediatrician. With my first, I went home after 48 hours in the hospital, and it wasn’t until the next day that I recognized how completely unprepared I was—despite reading Penelope Leach, Sheila Kitzinger, and the original edition of *What to Expect When You’re Expecting*. What made anyone expect I would be able to bathe this tiny infant? Yes, I had the little washcloths, and the cotton balls, and the hooded towel for drying him. The illustrated, step-by-step instructions did not convey the sense of responsibility I would feel, nor the fear of being unequal to the task.

I brought home an ordinary baby. He was my first and special to me, but he had no unusual characteristics other than a preternaturally wise expression on his face. Friends and family showered us with medium-quality gear: car seat, receiving blankets, onesies, and the dreaded bathtub with its spongy insert on which you rest the baby. My mother came to help; therefore the child received his first baths from more confident and experienced hands.

I can’t explain exactly what happened to me in those first days, but I do know that after about a week, as I rocked the cranky little fellow, his father said, “Why don’t

you sing to him?" Why didn't I? I was a singer; I loved music. An earthquake had caused faults in my interior landscape and into them had fallen my musical memory. I could not remember a single song. I've done all that again, twice, and each time there was a period of adjustment adding a new person to the family system. But nothing matched that initial shift of my tectonic plates, the way awe struck tenderness and made me a mother.

Mark brings us Jesus ready to walk into the Jordan, and John draws him as particularly philosophical. Matthew offers an infant Jesus, but his narrative points to men: a stepfather, a wicked king and his counselors, three wise ones from the East. Only Luke brings us into a stable, to the side of Jesus' mother, and into Mary's heart. I want to think that Luke shows us Jesus in his mother's arms because he had some sense of how a baby can reorganize things. I don't mean to suggest that we need to give birth or raise babies to be changed. Consider not a literal baby, but the baby as metaphor. The baby's arrival adjusts habits, attitudes, and feelings. The baby is helpless, yet powerful. The baby is challenging, yet winsome. We rearrange our schedules, our homes, and our lives to make space for the baby.

The world on the whole, however, is happy to relegate the baby to a barn, to wooden figures arranged just so, to a seasonal observance named after him but dominated by ugly sweater parties, decorated cookies, and the race to buy the video game or necklace or doll or skis that will fulfill the desires of the ones we seek to please. We may achieve surprise, but do we find awestruck tenderness?

I loved my baby, even though I felt a little scared to take care of him. When he cried for no particular reason, I rocked him and tried to conjure up something to sing. The first songs that came back to me were songs I learned at summer camp. I sang to him about "Black Socks," and then I remembered the peaceful songs we sang at evening campfires, like "Walk, Shepherdess, Walk" and "All Through the Night." Soon they all came back to me; I even put my own words to a favorite tune, "Going Home," otherwise known as the Largo from Dvorak's *New World* Symphony. It made a new song intended to comfort my "Sleepy Boy."

Thirty years later, he is a bearded man. When he comes home for Christmas, I always try to sit next to him in church, because I love his energetic if imprecise bass, especially as employed in the refrain of "Joy to the World." I have competition from the 12-year-old in our family, who reserves the right to fall asleep leaning against his brother at the 11 p.m. service. We live across the street from church, so at midnight

we walk home to our Christmas-arranged house. Someone turns on the tree lights. The first thing I do is seek wooden Baby Jesus, carefully secreted in a drawer of the coffee table, and place him in the manger, where his mother is waiting.

We reorganize church and home for the Christmas season, making room for the tree and the nativity set, but when the season ends, we put away the decorations. We file or recycle the cards sent from family and friends. New toys grow boring or break. Even books are read and shelved. Soon things are as they were before.

What would it be like to hold on to the disarrangement that the infant Jesus brings? Picture God in his mother's arms and shepherds—strangers—peering to see him, the song of angels in their ears, struck full on by awe and tenderness. We might never be the same.