

“A Baby Changes Everything”

Luke 2:1-14

The words “El Niño” first blew into the popular consciousness of the United States in the early 1990s. Meteorologists have long known about this cyclical climate pattern where warmer-than-usual Pacific Ocean temperatures profoundly affect weather all over the world. But with the El Niños of the 1990s, everybody began talking about this obscure weather phenomenon.

If you were around and paying attention in those years, you may remember how El Niño provided easy fodder for late-night TV comedians. They swiftly discovered how they could blame anything bad that happened on El Niño and get a few laughs.

El Niño cycles last for several years. They cause heavy rains in some areas and drought in others. Here in the United States, El Niño years have fewer hurricanes but more tornadoes. Around the world, El Niño often brings famine because rainfall disruptions — either drought or deluge, depending on where you live — play havoc with global harvests.

El Niño was named by Peruvian fishermen, who noticed how these weather changes begin in December. Literally, the Spanish expression means “little boy.” They called it that because December is when Christians welcome another El Niño into the world: the boy-child of Bethlehem.

If you’re talking about the weather, El Niño means change. But first-time parents know that another sort of El Niño — or La Niña in the case of a baby daughter — brings its own set of changes. Parents the world over nod their heads in comprehension when they hear this statement: “A baby changes everything.”

Suddenly, you can't just get up and go. You have to consider the baby's needs. It becomes harder to go out with your single friends, and you gravitate towards the ones who also have children.

If you do get up and go, taking the baby with you, you've got to cart around all that baby gear: diaper bag, stroller, car seat, portable playpen and all the rest. And let's not even talk about the lack of sleep!

For Mary and Joseph, parenthood is all that and much, much more. Besides the usual new-parent adjustments, they have to contend with visits from a couple of angels. One of these divine messengers matter-of-factly informs Joseph: "The child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 1:20).

Well, *that's* unusual! The angelic message plunges Joseph and Mary — and their relationship — into turbulent waters such as they've never imagined.

But they get through it. For those two, love triumphs over jealousy. Faith triumphs over doubt. Courage triumphs over fear.

Country-music singer Faith Hill captures the strangeness and the terror of Mary's experience with these lyrics:

"Teenage girl, much too young

Unprepared for what's to come

A baby changes everything

Not a ring on her hand

All her dreams and all her plans

A baby changes everything ...

The man she loves she's never touched

How will she keep his trust?

*A baby changes everything ...*¹

Quite apart from angelic proclamations about suspending the laws of nature, first-time parenthood is a life-changing experience for anyone. On that subject, Presbyterian minister and novelist Frederick Buechner has this to say (reflecting on the experience of his generation, when fathers weren't so often present in the delivery room):

*"When a child is born, a father is born. A mother is born too, of course, but at least for her it's a gradual process. Body and soul, she has nine months to get used to what's happening. She becomes what's happening. But for even the best-prepared father, it happens all at once. On the other side of the plate-glass window, a nurse is holding up something roughly the size of a loaf of bread for him to see for the first time. Even if he should decide to abandon it forever ten minutes later, the memory will nag him to the grave. He has seen the creation of the world. It has his mark upon it. He has its mark upon him. Both marks are, for better or worse, indelible."*²

Yes, a baby changes everything.

No one's ever ready for it. There's no course you can take that tells you how to do it. There's no way to obtain a certificate or diploma ahead of time, declaring that you've been trained, tested and fully prepared to shepherd a new human life through the perils of mortal existence.

It's a crazy system, but it's the only one we've got — so we'd all do well to make the best of it.

And that's exactly what Mary and Joseph do. They make the best of it.

Mary certainly learned a few things from her older cousin, Elizabeth. She and her husband Zechariah received their own bombshell angelic announcement about her conceiving a child in her old age. Zechariah, a local priest, was so shook up, he lost his voice for a while — quite the occupational hazard for a man who relied on his voice for a living. Those two were not the first to learn how a baby changes everything.

Not many months later, Mary and Joseph learn of the need to travel to Bethlehem. Nine months pregnant, Mary continues to make the best of it — as does Joseph, pounding on the door of every inn and guest house in Bethlehem until he finds that grumpy old character who leads them to the stable and shows them the pile of clean straw that will serve, in a pinch, as a delivery room.

“And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth and laid him in a manger.” A manger — a feeding trough — is surely not the cradle Mary imagined for her little Jesus! But it's the place to which the Lord has led her, so surely, it's the right place.

The news Mary received from the angel, which seemed so remarkable at the time, is no less remarkable in this present year. It's not so much Jesus' miraculous conception — which is, after all, a rather small detail in the full context of the story — but rather the greater miracle we call “incarnation.” Literally, the Latin word means “in the flesh.” The Christian church has always maintained as a central doctrine, that God, in the birth of Jesus, entered the world in the same way each of us entered it.

We've grown used to hearing about incarnation over the years — so our response may be, “tell me something I *haven't* heard” — but try for a moment to imagine what that claim must sound like to anyone hearing it for the first time. *God becoming human.*

God is *holy*, as the Scriptures frequently point out. The word “holy” means “set apart.” Something holy is fundamentally different from the life — and even the world — we know. Between the holy and the ordinary is a gulf that can be breached in only the most exceptional circumstances.

At the very center of the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem was a room known as the Holy of Holies. It was, according to ancient belief, the place in this world where God was most reliably present. No one was ever permitted to enter that space but the high priest, and then only on one day a year on Yom Kippur, the dreaded Day of Atonement, when the high priest would plead with the Lord not to devastate the sinful human race with one fiery blast of judgment.

Tradition has it that, in the latter centuries of temple worship — before the Romans smashed the place to rubble in the year 70 — the high priest would never enter the Holy of Holies unless he had a rope tied around one foot. The other end of the rope was carefully tended by another priest.

There was a reason for this odd practice. If the high priest should be less than forthcoming in making his own confession, and if he should then fall down dead in the presence of the *shekinah* — the bright cloud of God's presence that was said to fill that little room — then his fellow priests would be able to use the rope to haul his smitten body back out, for none of them could enter that space without meeting a similar fate.

This is not the image of God most of us have, especially not in the Christian tradition — and for a very good reason. We don't think of God that way because everything changed for us in that Bethlehem stable when whoever was attending Mary — it could have been a midwife, or Joseph himself — took that naked baby boy, wiped the fluids from his body, and laid him, still connected by the umbilical cord, on his mother's breast. And Mary, weeping tears of joy and exhaustion, looked into his eyes for the first time. She was overcome with wonder that here was not only the son she had long expected, but God in the flesh.

There was no *shekinah* in that humble place. No terror, no fire of judgment. There was no instant death for this awestruck teenager who not only looked upon God, but gazed deeply into God's eyes. In that stable in Bethlehem, Mary — the most-favored one — was permitted to do something no High Priest of Israel had ever done. She held the Most High in her arms and tenderly kissed God on the forehead.

Earlier in the gospel of Luke, we hear of a song Mary sings. She sings it at the time she first learns of the holy child on his way. It's known as the Magnificat, from the first word of the song in Latin translation: "My soul magnifies the Lord ..."

It's a song about how God changes everything.

"The Mighty One has done great things for me," she sings, "and holy is God's name."

Mary recounts the mighty deeds of the Lord who has just intervened in her life. God has "brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly ... has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty" (Luke 1:46-55). It may seem like these things have little to do with the plight of a young, unwed mother in Galilee, but clearly Mary sees her experience in the context of a much greater plan.

Who are the powerful cast down from their thrones? Nothing like that has ever happened in Mary's experience. The Roman emperors have reigned for generations, and the throne's present occupant gives no sign of resigning. When has Mary ever seen, in her short life, all the hungry people of the earth invited to a great banquet, and the arrogant rich sent off to try their hand at begging? These promises, compelling as they are to one such as her, have yet to be realized.

This baby changes everything, not only for his parents, but for the whole human race. The birth of Jesus changes the religion game completely, because upon hearing this story, we rediscover — or maybe understand for the first time — that God's deepest desire for us is that we enter the place of holiness not through a portal of fear, but through a portal of love.

That same Jesus is calling us on Christmas Day, as he has a habit of doing, calling us to himself and into a deeper relationship with him. Everything about the life we've been living that's bitter, ugly, broken or shameful we can lay on the straw beside the manger. We need carry such burdens no longer; the grown-up Jesus will bear them for us. There is no anger, no judgment before his manger-bed. There is only grace and acceptance and love.

The timeless invitation comes to us this Christmas, as it has in so many Christmases past. Come, draw near to Jesus Christ, whose coming into our world changes everything!

In the words of the beloved carol "Infant Holy, Infant Lowly":

*Thus rejoicing,
free from sorrow,
praises voicing
greet the morrow:*

Christ the babe was born for you!

Christ the babe was born for you!

May the peace of God . . .

#276 – Infant Holy, infant lowly