



12/24/2020 A New Birth
Isaiah 9:2-7; Psalm 96; Titus 2:11-14; Luke 2:1-14
Reverend Giuseppe Mattei

Each Christmas many people make the trek “home” to friends and family—with all its wonders and challenges. Some travel great distances and others a few miles to experience a sense of connection and “being counted.” This year, travel is restricted, and most people will have to be content with on-line gatherings; the smell of the Christmas meal, the hugs and kisses of loved ones, the unwrapping of gifts will all have to be virtual. There is real loss there as relationships will have to be strengthened or patched up from a distance; not much value in staying so far away from friends and family, but because we love them, even the ones with whom we have shared difficult conversations and challenging time, we vow to protect them and keep them safe by keeping our distance.

Joseph also makes his journey with Mary, to his hometown of Bethlehem to be counted among his tribe for the government. Eventually, he did not have any family left and his friends must have all relocated elsewhere in search of work because he did not go to any one’s house in particular. He was not counting on a warm reception, a rich meal, or an extra bedroom; Joseph and Mary were at least hoping to beat the crowd and find a place at the inn. Instead, they are relegated to a stable. Yet, it is precisely here that the great home-coming takes place. They barely make it to the stable that Jesus arrives, and what began as an order of the Roman Empire becomes the in-breaking realm of God. The sense of family and wonder expands as shepherds arrive on the scene and share with those present the amazing story of angels appearing to them and singing to them the good news.

As I try to imagine that first Christmas, I am convinced that a strong bond was being formed among all those present: the young pregnant lady in her birth pangs; a useless and fearful husband; the innkeeper’s wife assisting Mary and giving marching orders to her own husband and the other servants; and, of course, the shepherds and anyone else aware of the commotion.

There is much movement, shouts, perhaps even confusion, animals shoving left and right, water buckets being rushed to the site, splashing, and getting everybody around wet. A painful moan, a final push, a baby bursting into a stressful cry quickly soothed in warm blankets and assured by his mother’s sweet milk. All becomes abruptly silent; all is calm; all have tears in their eyes. Silence was filled with grace. The baby seems to make it alright against all odds. Even the darkest night has its promise.

The evangelist Luke seems to be giving lighting directions for a stage presentation. At first, the spotlight shines over all the Earth subdued and controlled by the Roman



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invader; then it slowly narrows from Galilee, to Nazareth, where in the divine realm, Gabriel announces to Mary God's plan of a baby through her. Then, off to Bethlehem, to the people around a young woman, and, finally, to the babe. God's plan of salvation? Right there in a manger.

On the night Jesus was born, it wasn't that everything suddenly became safe or peaceful. The Roman Empire continued; war, disease, destruction, and poverty were not eliminated. And yet, a new door on the journey toward salvation was opened. God came to earth, to live and die as one of us and to teach us about a different kind of peace: a peace that would give us freedom to love without fear of death, pain, or shame. Jesus will tell the disciples, "I am the door." (John 10:9)

Paul tells us openly: in Jesus, "[t]he grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all."¹ God's eternal purpose is to fill us with God's glory and that we may have the fullness of joy: such is the song of the angels to the shepherds in the field, and such is the Christian message. Since the inception of creation, God has become involved with the world and God's grace can be seen all over the place. When humanity was ready to really see and encounter God in person, Jesus was born. The Fourteenth century mystic and theologian, Meister Eckart, writes: "When the time was fulfilled, grace was born."² But that grace needs to be born in us as well if we want to conduct, as Paul instructs us, lives that are "self-controlled, upright, and godly" (v. 12).³

Our calling is to see God's face, to walk with God, to be full of God, to give birth to God. What would our life *be* if it weren't in God? Could that be even *possible*? We wouldn't be here if we weren't in God? What should happen for us to be aware of God's presence in us? What humility should we assume to conceive God in us, to give birth to God in us and make God manifest in our lives?

Again, in the words of Meister Eckart, "What help is it to me that Mary is full of grace, if I am not also full of grace? And what help is it to me that the Father gives birth to his Son unless I, too, give birth to him? It is for this reason that God gives birth to his Son

¹ Titus 2:11

² Quoted by Matthew Fox, *Passion for Creation: The Earth-Honoring Spirituality of Meister Eckhart*.

³ see Romans 8:28-30; Colossians 1:15-20; Galatians 4:4-7; and Ephesians 1:3-10.



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in a perfect soul and lies in the maternity bed so that he can give birth to him again in all his works. All our works can birth divinity."⁴

May this Christmas be not only a new birth of Christ *for* us but also a new birth of Christ *in* us and a new birth of *us* in God. Amen.

⁴ Matthew Fox, Passion for Creation.