



**Glory to God in the Highest Heaven**  
**Isaiah 9:2-7; Psalm 96; Titus 2:11-14; Luke 2:1-20**  
**Reverend Giuseppe Mattei (December 24, 2023)**

We celebrate an anniversary tonight: 800 years ago, on Christmas Eve in 1223, St. Francis of Assisi summoned the people of Greccio, Italy, about 1 ½ hour South of Assisi by car, to a *live* nativity scene, a manger he had arranged with straw and a breathing ox and ass. The scene dramatically lacked human figures. The atmosphere he evoked as he announced the words of the Gospel telling of Mary and Joseph traveling to Bethlehem where the Savior came to Earth, filled his hearers with joy and awe. Was the absence of Mary, Joseph, and baby Jesus an encouragement to the people to emulate the holy family? Was it an attempt to strengthen the local people's faith and confidence by showing Christ's humanity, humility and poverty?

What Francis did in Greccio was in the tradition of liturgical drama.

Almost 350 years later, the Jesuits assembled a nativity set in Prague. The scene includes sculptured figures of the Blessed Mother and Joseph by the baby Jesus lying a manger. An ox and ass are with them, all under a prominent star. Nearby are shepherds as well as the Magi.

(The earliest known pictorial references to the birth of Christ are in Rome. The first is in the third century catacombs of Priscilla and depicts only a seated woman presumed to be Mary holding her baby as the Magi approach with gifts. A century later, on a marble sarcophagus at the cemetery of St. Agnes, the Magi's camels are shown with them and the Holy Family. Once Dec. 25 was fixed as the date for the celebration of Jesus' birth in the fourth century, Luke's depiction of the scene in Bethlehem began to be depicted in sculpture of three dimensions.)

Of the four books of the Gospels, only Luke and Matthew give us infancy accounts. Mark goes straight into the start of Jesus' ministry as an adult and John gives us a poetic prologue which speaks of the eternal Word incarnated in a concrete time and place and rejected by his own. John starts with a beginning before the beginning (on Earth).

Luke presents the annunciation story and the visitation to Elizabeth, the inconvenient and difficult journey to Bethlehem due to an imperial census, the scene of the shepherds and angels, and finally the infant lying in the manger surrounded by Mary, Joseph, and the shepherds. Luke's infancy narrative is from Mary's perspective.

Matthew mentions Joseph's experience and his inner dilemma at the news of Mary's pregnancy. In a dream, an angel assures him of a divine intervention as the origin of Mary's pregnancy. The story then turns to the travels of the Magi, bearing gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh following the guiding star.

It's evident that the whole tradition around Christmas (whether from the gospels or from people's piety) is put together by men. How else would you have a bucolic scene of the recent birth of a baby serenely sleeping under the bright light of a star, sheep bleating, shepherds stretching their neck for a chance to have a look, Mary and Joseph onlooking but not worried the very least that the baby might awake, Magi offering homage, incense chocking the air in the crowded room, and then a drummer boy entering the scene and making a racket?

This is, in fact, what Cuban-American theologian, Kat Armas, shortly after giving birth herself, thought of the nativity through the experience of Mary:

I've often said that the Bible is a book written by men, for men. Throughout the centuries most of its interpreters and preachers have been men as well. It's no surprise then, that the story of the incarnation—and its rendering and interpretations thereafter—would glide over the messy realities of pregnancy and labor. Indeed, we're told about the politics requiring Joseph to register in his hometown, about the shepherds keeping watch, and about

heavenly hosts of angels celebrating, but we hear nothing of the blood, the nakedness, the primal groans, the fear, the strength and power of the human body, the first-time shrieks of new life bursting into the world.... This matters because a broken, refugee, brown, female, naked, stretched, hormonal, marginalized body is how divinity entered this world and where divinity still makes itself most known today....<sup>1</sup>

Jesus sucked at Mary's breasts. She had to change and wash his diapers. And most surely, she must have been sleep deprived with a desperate need to close her eyes and get some rest without a crowd of people watching her. This very ordinary scene turns out to be a scandalous theophany; God's greatest self-revelation is of divinity in diapers.

What we have in the gospel, Armas highlights, is pretty much a sterilized story of incarnation far removed from its reality. God chooses to enter into our hurt, our grief, our despair, our anger, our joys, and our longings. God enters the messiness of our daily life and wants to experience it: one like us, one of us, one with us.

God's incarnation was not a triumphalist entry into the world. This very ordinary scene turns out to be a scandalous theophany; God's greatest self-revelation is of divinity in diapers. Love becomes this vulnerable for us with the purpose of getting extremely close and accessible.

God came into the world at a very dark time in history. Isaiah described the people of his time as walking in darkness and dwelling in a land of gloom, people who suffered under the rod of an overseer: treated like yoked oxen, valued for their labor and taxes, people whose personhood had ceased to matter.

From the time of Isaiah's writing to the time of the birth of Jesus, empires have succeeded to empires and the people have remained subjugated and abused. And it did not end with Jesus' birth.

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<sup>1</sup> Kat Armas, *Sacred Belonging: A 40-Day Devotional on the Liberating Heart of Scripture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2023), 154, 155.

Every epoch has known its share of boots that trample in battle and cloaks soaked with blood (Isaiah 9:5): cruelty and violence, indifference and arrogance remain a reality today.

But those who expect a divine intervention that magically changes the course of history have a simplistic understanding of how God operates.

Throughout salvation history, God has listened to the cry of suffering people and has committed to walk alongside with us. God does not take away suffering and hardship but calls people to a sacred journey of discovery and participation in the unfolding of the divine plan.

The Creator did not exercise power and might but set the universe on a course of evolution in which divine love would one day take on flesh and need to rely on the goodwill of people with generous, open hearts.

The babe wrapped in swaddling clothes is a sign that God exercises power as faithful, loving committed accompaniment in vulnerability. And all of this, to invite us to become like the God who dwells among us, seeking to find a home in us.

May the Prince of Peace, who has chosen to come to us in full vulnerability, teach us the way of peace and hospitality towards one another. Amen.