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First Sunday after Christmas Day

Isaiah 61:10-62:3; Ps 147:13-21; Galatians 3:23-25-4:4-7; John 1:1-18

Good Shepherd Berkeley

December 27, 2009

An Ordinary Baby

Merry Christmas!

We have 12 whole days to consider what the birth of Jesus the Christ, the baby in the manger, means for each of us individually, and for all of us together.

Christmas Day is just the beginning.

A baby human.

A baby human that Mary of Nazareth gave birth to in the barn.

Young Mary – the first priest to bring the body of Christ to the people.

Sometimes, during certain therapies, a counselor might ask,

“If you were an animal, what animal would you be and what would your life be like?”

If you were an animal, what animal would you be and what would your life be like?

A rather fun and insightful exercise, hard to resist.

You could be thinking about that right now.

One woman said she thought she would be an otter because she could play all day in the water, eating shellfish. Still, she said, otters have strong family relationships and take care of their young well.

Another woman said she would like to be a trout. *A trout?* Yes, she said. She could swim, facing upstream surrounded by others swimming upstream.

One man said he would be a dominant male lion because the females would bring his food to him and he would just have to patrol the boundaries of his pride.

But, of course, it has fallen to each of **us** to be a *human* animal.

Jesus was born a human animal,

Born an ordinary human, he came out of his mother Mary,

just like the rest of us were born of a mother.

Few doubt that Jesus was not only an ordinary human,

But he was an ordinary human nevertheless.

As time passes, we see that Jesus had no barriers, no blocks, to the divine within him.

He became filled with the essence of God.

Yet he remained an ordinary human.

Fully human, and fully filled with God.

He embodied intimacy with all that was Holy.

Fully human, fully divine.

A complete child of God.
 Sometimes I wonder if fully human and fully divine are the same thing.
 Humanity and the world of God are known to us as separate realms, but in *this* birth
 we come to find out they are the same in Jesus.
 Hildegard of Bingen describes it this way in her Alleluia verse to Mary:

Alleluia! light
 burst from your untouched
 womb like a flower
 on the farther side
 of death. The world-tree is blossoming. Two
 realms become one.

The divine and the carnal have met together as one. Jesus is the divine within the
 carnal, within flesh.
 In-carn-ation.

John says, in today's portion of the Gospel, that Jesus has made God known to us.
 A divine human has made God known to us.

After Christmas Day, if we are lucky,
 a peace,
 a friend and family time,
 descends on our communities,
 and we may experience a time during which love and warmth
 transcend commerce, at the least 'deadline' aspect of commerce, in our lives.

It is often a humanly warmer time in our lives in the middle of the darkest part of
 winter. There has been a mid-winter feast of human warmth and of light for eons,
 one that involves FOOD and gatherings.
 But even when that doesn't happen, this piece between Christmas Day and New
 Year's Day still remains a time set apart.
 This cannot be called ordinary time.

It could be that this time remains in our culture,
 consciously or not,
 a time when many in our culture, not just Christians, are reminded that
 God is made known to us
 through the birth of a new human being.

The passage from Galatians and the love song from the Gospel of John that we read
 today, emphasize that we are heirs of God,
 adopted children of God,
as we are, without further correction,
 or in the case of Galatians, without further surgical procedures.

God loves us.

Being human is the only inclusion criterion.

But what is it we can do to feel more intimate with God?

It is a truth that

By becoming more fully human we become more fully divine ourselves.

By becoming more fully divine ourselves, we become more fully human.

For seeking more closeness with God, certain precepts seem constant in traditional methods of becoming more intimate with God, regardless of the spiritual or religious mystical tradition. They remain similar group to group. They are not necessarily biblical and most come out of male monastic traditions of both the east and west, Christian and other paths. We are urged to practice these precepts, even if they don't seem to fit for us.

In her book At the Root of this Longing, Carol Lee Flinders identifies these practices. They may be more or less narrowly interpreted, but regardless remain a core of traditional spiritual practice.

- 1 Be silent. Curb speech and still the mind.
- 2 Seek the lesser place. Consider others more than yourself.
- 3 Resist your desires and bodily senses. Learn that your body doesn't belong to you.
- 4 Turn inward and seek what is there. Disentangle yourself from the concerns of the external and the matters of daily life.

I could never quite understand my discomfort with these techniques or principals, but I finally have come to know why they didn't sit right with me.

The problem with these teachings taught alone, and as supremely desirable, is that they negatively affect millions of people.

They have further incapacitated and denied those who have been silenced already;

Those who have had little voice or freedom, historically disregarded people;

people of color,

women,

gays, lesbians, bisexuals, transgendered people,

the poor, the sick, prisoners,

those oppressed for any reason.

In short, these teachings have harmed all the people Jesus loved most.

We, as Christians have a balance to those techniques of drawing closer to God.

We come from a history and spirituality where being an ordinary human being is of great value.

Yes! We're a 'body' people.

To experience intimacy with God, we have other principles, taught to us by Christmas.

First:

- 1 Find your own voice and tell your story. Make yourself heard at every level of the institutions that decide what constitutes justice.
- 2 Know who you are. Identify what it is you need and learn how to meet those needs.
- 3 Reclaim your body and its desires. Oppose whatever denigrate human bodies, especially female bodies, and recognize and resist hatred of certain kinds of bodies. Speak against revulsion of normal consensual sexual behaviors. Feel and love every sense in your body, and the way your sensual self works.
- 4 Move about freely and take back your streets, in what ever way that applies to you, from all who might bind and enclose you. Resist those who keep you bound and unable to move forward. Take back your spirit and soul. They were given to you by God, incarnate in your human flesh.

These principals offer more life for some than the 'keep silence' principals, and they're hardest for the people who need them the most.

On Christmas morning as I was driving up to Sebastopol I happened to follow a car up Hwy 101 that had a bumper sticker that said "Stay Human." I would loose view of it for awhile in the traffic, and then it would be in front of me again.

'Stay human' moved before me over and over.

I thought about it from a Bethlehem point of view. When I was about exit the freeway for Sebastopol, that car exited, too, 'Stay Human' stayed right in front of me and I followed it all the way to my destination like wise men after the star.

Finally, as I turned into my destination, the car continued forward.

Yes, I thought, being fully human is honoring and reflecting the full divinity of Jesus at Bethlehem.

I've probably told this story before, but for some reason I always think of it at Christmas.

When we raised goats in rural Mendocino County, all the goat people bred their goats with bucks that we imported from someone else's place. Hardly anyone kept bucks because they smelled rank and made the milk taste off.

So we got these bucks, and when the does had been bred, we marked it carefully on the calendar, because we knew that in almost exactly 5 months, the goats would give birth and we wanted to be there for that.

Once we were talking to a couple from church, discussing the woman's pregnancy when my young daughter said with surprise,

"Is Carol pregnant?" I said that she was.

My daughter said, "Well, when did they mate?"

I said, "Well I'm not certain, I guess a few months ago."

My daughter said, "Well! I didn't hear anything about it."

Even then, she knew that the birth of an ordinary human baby was an event of great importance that should be marked on the calendar.

And this human baby that we celebrate at Christmas. How could anyone have known?

How could we have known that this baby was the incarnation of Wisdom herself?
How could we have known that in this baby,
what had come into being in this baby was life,
and the life was the light of all people?

The Gospel of John says is that the Creator of the universe behaves toward humanity in just the same way as Jesus did, and does.

We know God by the thoughts and behaviors of Jesus,
and he sure didn't act like the 'King of Kings' we hear in hymns, but rather like a simple ordinary human being who was fully incorporating the Holy.

God acts to bring those at the margins into the center as Beloved, just as Jesus did, and does.

When we are at our fully human best, we act to bring those at the margins in to the center as beloved.

And in that moment, we are intimate with God.

What has come into being in Jesus is life, and the life is the light of all people.
The birth of Jesus embraces life and humanity, not seeking to separate from carnal life,

by only turning inward to seek God, but looking outward, too, and taking life on.

We are told to take hold of life and really hold it, love it, and dance with it!

Take, eat! This is the body of Christ.

We're a people of passionate flesh, valuing this human birth as divine.

Valuing our own births as divine.

What has come into being in Jesus **is** life, and the life is the light of all people.

Not just the good people, not just the decent people, but all people.

You. Me.

The light is already here in that bundle of human flesh that our Mother God sings to sleep in that food trough, that he might bring birth to all humanity.

Merry Christmas!