

Night of Divine Mystery
A Christmas Eve Sermon
December 24, 2009
by Dr. Frank Trotter

Many years ago a Jewish lady named Mrs. Rosenberg was stranded late one night at a fashionable resort - one that did not admit Jews. The desk clerk looked down at his book and said, "Sorry, no room. The hotel is full." The Jewish lady said, "But your sign says that you have vacancies." The desk clerk stammered and then said curtly, "You know that we do not admit Jews. Now if you will try the other side of town..." Mrs. Rosenberg stiffened noticeably and said, "I'll have you know I'm a Christian." The desk clerk said, "Oh, yeah, let me give you a little test. How was Jesus born?" Mrs. Rosenberg replied, "He was born to a virgin named Mary in a little town called Bethlehem." "Very good," replied the hotel clerk. "Tell me more." Mrs. Rosenberg replied, "He was born in a manger." "That's right," said the hotel clerk. "And why was he born in a manger?" Mrs. Rosenberg said loudly, "Because a jerk like you in the hotel wouldn't give a Jewish lady a room for the night!"

The ancient story about the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem reminds us that there's often been both chaos and mystery surrounding childbirth and child custody.

On December 15, a female weight lifter from Chile who competed in the Beijing Olympics was exercising in a gym in Sao Paulo, Brazil when she suddenly began to feel very sick. When a doctor came and examined her, he discovered that she was about to give birth. A few moments later, the 22-year-old woman who had won a big weight lifting contest only a week earlier, delivered a three months prematurely. She told the doctor that she had not even known she was pregnant. How can you *not* know that you're pregnant?

A university creative writing class was asked to write a concise essay that contained four elements: (1) religion; (2) royalty; (3) sex; and (4) mystery. The essay that won first place read like this: "My God," said the Queen. "I'm pregnant. I wonder who did it?" In the story we remember tonight, Mary, the queen of heaven, is pregnant. Who did it? The Lord God Almighty, creator of heaven and earth.

Theologian William Loader writes, “In one of the most beautiful scenes of Luke’s infancy narratives a heavenly angel meets a young woman, Mary. It almost calls for music and ballet. The ancient world is celebrating not so much a birth as a life, but in doing so transposes the mystery and wonder of that life into its first moments. The Christmas stories are not really about a baby; they are about the person of Christ. To miss that is to miss their point. Modern minds, schooled in the mechanisms of reproduction, must suspend their disbelief and enter the fantasy of the story. A virgin girl conceives, is overshadowed by an angel. The miracle begins. In this life God is to be found. She will receive the seed and bear the child. Undiluted divinity will flow through his life. We are light years away from talk of chromosomes and genetics, but we are celebrating the immanence of the God whom we, too, may meet in our moments of intimacy.”¹

The great cellist Pablo Casals, in his life story entitled *Joys and Sorrows*, revisits his first memory of attending church on Christmas Eve when he was 5. He walked to the church in a small village in Spain hand-in-hand with his father, who was the church organist. As he walked, he shivered – not because the night was cold, but because the atmosphere was so mysterious. Casals writes, “I felt that something wonderful was about to happen. High overhead, the heavens were full of stars, and as we walked in silence I held my father’s hand... In the dark, narrow streets, there were moving figures, shadowy and spectral and silent, too, moving into the church, silently... My father played the organ, and when I sang, it was my heart that was singing, and I poured out everything that was in me.”²

Anita Wheatcroft, an author of many books on the Christian journey, tells a story of a Christmas long ago in her childhood when she and her family lived in New York City. She writes, “During an annual Nativity pageant, the church was especially full. Hushed in darkness, the congregation watched the lighting of the candles. Toward the back, I sat, one timid little girl, with my family. Newly moved to the city after a family separation and trauma, my life had settled down, but I was still overwhelmed and homesick for my grandparents and familiar friends. That night, however, caught up in

¹ William Loader, “First Thoughts on Year B Gospel Passages from the Lectionary: Advent 4,” <http://wwwstaff.murdoch.edu.au/~loader/MarkAdvent4.htm>. Dr. Loader is a member of the faculty at Murdoch University in Perth, Australia (Uniting Church of Australia).

² Pablo Casals, *Joys and Sorrows*, as told to Albert E. Kahn (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1974), 29-30.

awe as organ music rolled out from balcony to rafters, I heard a familiar story I loved, and was transported to another time and place. Down the aisle swept a colorful procession as the lights went up, revealing the magnificent manger scene. Travelers, bearded shepherds and finally the three kings bearing gifts advanced majestically.

“Before anyone knew it, I found myself following them. The journey down that long aisle was an early spiritual pilgrimage for me, yet it felt like a kind of homecoming. When I reached the manger scene, there were a sleepy donkey, real sheep, and Mary and Joseph beneath an angel with outstretched wings. Above all, there was a light in the manger, enfolding us in its glow. Kneeling in front of it, I had a sense of exaltation, of self-offering as real as any I have ever known since. This was real to me, and I was there. Of course, it didn’t last long. I was lifted to my feet by an usher and carried down the aisle, back to my embarrassed family, and the pageant swept on. I was vaguely aware of subdued smiles, and my parents’ whispered scolding didn’t matter. My discovery was my own, and I had something now that no one could ever take from me. I had been to Bethlehem. I had seen it all for the first time and I would never forget it.”³

That’s our journey, too, on his night of – to make our way down the aisle to kneel before our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ!

Thanks be to God. Amen.

³ Anita Wheatcroft, “How Far to Bethlehem,” *Fellowship in Prayer*, 47, December 1996, 37-38.

