

“She wrapped him in bands of cloth”
A sermon preached at
Heart of the Rockies Christian Church
(Disciples of Christ)
Fort Collins, Colorado
December 25, 2011

The heavens open and what is disclosed? A baby, God manifest in the flesh. The stable, the manger, the straw; poverty, cold, darkness—these form the setting of the divine gift. In this child, God gives his supreme message to the soul—Spirit to spirit—but in a human way. Outside in the fields the heavens open and the shepherds look up astonished to find the music and radiance of reality all around them. But inside, our closest contact with that same reality is being offered to us in the very simplest, homeliest way—emerging right into our ordinary life. A baby—just that.

Evelyn Underhill

Texts: Isaiah 9:2-7 Luke 2:1-14

The scene of Jesus’ birth has been recreated tens of thousands of times: through pen on parchment by Matthew & Luke, on the canvases of the Great Masters, and here on our chancel last week through our children’s pageant. Each rendering in its own way is elemental and precious: a mother, a father, a new born child. What makes this one birth so unique is the church’s claim that, in the child born to Joseph and Mary, the Almighty has visited our Planet.

It’s remarkable enough that the Creator of the Universe would make an appearance as a human being. But the Bible takes this implausible announcement one step further. The Maker and Ruler Over All slipped into our world in the dark of night, left his son on our collective doorstep, tapped lightly on the door, then slipped back off into the night, leaving barely a scribbled note to say, "Here is my son. His life is in your hands now. My son is now your son." Centuries before the event, Isaiah had put it bluntly when he wrote, "Unto us a child is born; unto us a son is given."

It is the customary and faithful thing to think of ourselves, and our world, as resting in the arms of a loving God. But on Christmas, standing as if with the shepherds and the wise men at the manger, you and I are asked to consider that God has put God’s self in *our* hands. We are Joseph and Mary, you and I. Unto us the Lord has delivered this tiny newborn. What an amazing way for God to lay claim upon the world.

When he grew up, Jesus taught with authority. He healed broken bodies, confronted authorities, commanded the forces of nature and brought the dead back to life, which makes it very difficult to imagine that there was a time when his little hand reached up out of the manger, so vulnerable and utterly dependent. This is the scandal of the Christian faith, either the sheerest of wishful thinking or the deepest spiritual truth:

our God, Life's Alpha and Omega, waits for us to receive him, take him in, into our hearts and lives, and to raise him!

Don Richardson – he's in his late 70s now, he – was born in Canada. He became a missionary and worked among the indigenous people of Western New Guinea. He served Jesus by serving the Sawi tribe – cannibalistic headhunters – he, his wife and their child, seven months old when they arrived in Indonesia. The first thing he did was set about learning the native tongue of the Sawi. A very difficult language, there are nineteen tenses for every verb. The most challenging task was to interpret the Gospel to the Sawi. He faced extraordinary cultural barriers. Later, he wrote a book about his efforts to put the good news into words and images to which the Saw could relate (*Peace Child*, Regal Books, 1975, p.214). In fact, one of the gifts Richardson has imparted to the ongoing work of missions is his insistence that in every culture there are stories, practices, understandings about life that he calls “redemptive analogies.” Beliefs and experiences within every culture that help contextualize the Bible's worldview and its account of God's love.

Richardson worked for months to establish a relationship of trust. But as he told the Sawi about Jesus, they would grow restless. They were uninterested until one day Richardson told them the story of Judas' betrayal of Jesus. The Sawi listened intently as they heard how Judas had traveled with Jesus, eaten with him, gained his trust and then sold him out to his enemies, betraying Jesus with a kiss. A sign of affection had become a sign of betrayal. The Sawi's eyes sparkled with amazement and admiration – for Judas. For the Sawi, deceit and betrayal were among the highest virtues.

Richardson's task was overwhelming. He would have to work against generations of cultural conditioning in order to reverse Sawi thinking. Richardson persuaded enemy villages to move fairly close together, so he could have easier access to them. They reluctantly consented because the missionary provided them with tools and medicine. Over time, however, the tensions mounted.

Finally, Richardson called the tribal chiefs together and told them that he was leaving, that each should return to their former tribal grounds. Richardson had given up. He and his family had decided to go downstream to work with another tribe. The people, though, were extremely upset. Richardson's coming, his family's living in the jungle among the Sawi had had an impact Richardson hadn't recognized.

One morning, the tribes gathered in a large field. The mood was solemn, the air electric with tension. Richardson had no idea what was happening. After a period of nervous waiting and without any words, one of the villagers suddenly grabbed his nursing child from the arms of his anxious wife, ran to an enemy, and handed the baby to him. The mother screamed, begging her husband not to do this. And then a warrior from one of the other tribes did the same thing. Other young children were exchanged between opposing villages. Cries of anguish arose from both sides. Richardson feared the worst. Then a tribesman explained that the villages were exchanging what they called a *Tarop*, a peace child. As long as the children were unhurt, the tribes would live

in peace. To Richardson's amazement, shouts of joy began to break out. The people began to sing and dance.

Out of the traditions of their own culture, the people had provided the very thing that Richardson had been searching for in vain: an analogy to God's self-giving, redemptive love. Surely God didn't want to give up his only child to a hostile people. But for the sake of love, for the sake of reconciliation and peace, God entrusted his peace child to the world. The Sawi listened with new interest. They reasoned that if Jesus were a *Tarop*, a peace child, it was wrong to betray him; that the future of their tribe was dependent on their care for the peace children among them and the Peace Child sent from above.

Richardson continued to discover these “redemptive analogies” in cultures throughout the world. Truth is, they're all around us. And I'd argue that they're more than analogies. If the Lord of the Universe has chosen incarnation – to live among us as one of us – it stands to reason that the universe itself is designed to express the gift of redemption, making all things whole and new again. If God has chosen to reveal God's self in the flesh, full of grace and truth, then we live in a world hospitable to the gifts of God's person and God's ways of love and justice and right living. Experiences of mercy and grace and healing and forgiveness and resurrection aren't simply analogous to the works of God made manifest in the Christ child born two thousand years ago. They're expressions of God's presence made manifest, here, now.

Not too many years ago – you may recall the story – a cruise ship sank beneath 25-foot waves about 200 miles east of Virginia, but not before crew members were rescued from the ship's deck (2000 Cable News Network, CNN.com). The Seabreeze I, formerly of the Premier Cruise Lines, had just been sold in the line's bankruptcy case and hadn't been put into regular service. With a skeletal crew, it was on its way from Nova Scotia to Charleston, South Carolina, when an engine failed and the ship listed dangerously in the storm.

The captain radioed an S.O.S. He reported that the ship was taking on water. The U.S. Coast Guard sent two HH-60 helicopters and two C-113 Hercules planes to attempt a rescue in treacherous waters. Lt. Craig Neubecker, one of the helicopter pilots, said the situation was chaotic. When they lowered the basket to rescue the crew, the winds blew it uncontrollably. The only way they could effect salvation – I know this is a religious word, now, salvation, but it didn't start out that way (it simply means a *rescue*); the only way the Coast Guard could rescue the crew – was to risk sending down one of their own in the basket. One of them volunteered, was lowered from the heavens, gained control of the situation on the deck and helped to save all 34 crew members.

You understand why I'm hesitant to describe that experience as a *redemptive analogy*? It was an expression of *Emmanuel* – God with us; a fruit of the incarnation, God's presence at work in the world. Unto *us* this child is born. Unto *us* Jesus is given. Again and again he comes to the doorstep of our world, to the threshold of our hearts,

awaiting a people who will receive him. As we do, he changes us, sets us free from all that binds us, and restores in us the very image in which we've been created, the image of God.

So, Don Richardson and I have prepared this gift for you this morning. It's our Christmas gift. You need to know that some assembly is required. You'll have to work at a bit. I hope this won't put you off. The gift is simply this: the admonishment to watch. Our gift is to encourage you to watch for these experiences of God's redeeming presence at work in you and all around you. If you practice, you'll get good at seeing them. They may not be as obvious as enemies exchanging their children to effect reconciliation, or that Coast Guard serviceman risking his life to save the crew of a sinking ship. But each is just as dramatic and important in its own way, a share in what it means for God to have visited our planet. You'll find yourself becoming more a part of what God is at work doing in the world. You'll enter into the joy that comes with being, well, a guardian of the life and practices, the gifts and even the image of this child born for us, this Peace Child given to us.

— Jeff Wright
serdd11