

Who's that baby?
Advent III 2018
Emmanuel Church, Geneva
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In France, we wait to place the baby in the manger until Christmas Eve, normally in my family when we came home from midnight Mass. Is that a tradition in Switzerland too?

The creche was set up on the First Sunday of Advent. The sheep and the three wise men were placed far off. Every day they moved a little. For some years my sisters and I each had a numbered sheep, and depending whether we were behaved or not, our individual sheep would move ahead or go backwards. Needless to say, we had sheep fights, and I remember how my sheep would mysteriously have taken several steps back during the night.

But then finally arrived Christmas Eve. The manger was ready, the sheep and shepherds were just around the corner and the three magi not far off anymore. Finally one of us was chosen to place the Infant in his manger. It was a solemn moment, because after Baby Jesus lay in his pile of straw, we could open our presents! Get that Kid in there!

Saint Francis of Assisi is credited with inventing the idea of the Nativity scene, the creche. He'd been to the Holy Land and was inspired to recreate Christmas for people back home. The tradition began and has spread around the world, with live and plaster characters, right down to my collection of santons, the Provençale village scene around the stable. Every year I add two characters.

And yes, Baby Jesus gets laid in the manger on Christmas Eve, never before, heavens forfend.

I am sure that each of you has spent time gazing on the scene, whether at home or at church or some public Nativity scene. Whom do you see in the crib?

Well, Jesus, of course. And Mary. And Joseph.

But what does it mean to you? I mean, Jesus was born, he taught for a very few years, was betrayed and let himself be arrested, was crucified under Pilate, rejected, humiliated and tortured to death. This is what he was born for. You've probably heard the trope that says that the pricking of the straw on the baby's skin foreshadows the piercing of the nails and the spear. Why set up a cute scene with an ox and a donkey and sheep and shepherds and glamorous magicians with their one camel?

To tell the story, you might answer. It's beautiful: the angels serenading the Mother, the rich gifts from exotic strangers, the joy parents are supposed to feel at the arrival of a newborn child, the holy night with a special star shining.

Not to mention that old Bishop, Saint Nick, zipping about...

I want to invite you to take a different look. We always say that Jesus was born of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary. This is not a biological affirmation, of course. It means that Jesus' conception and birth are no accident. These are the infinite and unknowable God's expression in the terms of a real human being's life. This also required the affirmation of the young woman in question.

By extension, you and I are not accidents either, though we need to affirm that ourselves. We are more than protoplasm molded by genetic codes. In Jesus we see the divine through what the human does. Despite the appearances, often enough, you and I have the same humanity that can also enjoy the life of the living God as Jesus does.

As he does. Present tense. For when the Word of God died on the cross, nothing happened that will not happen to each of us. Except for one thing: that individual death is our collective and individual life. To put it another way, Jesus Christ got nothing out of his acceptance of suffering and his gruesome death. Not to mention the life that came before, of loneliness and misunderstanding and rejection. God didn't give him a gold crown, not to mention frankincense and myrrh.

But what did happen was the beginning of a re-ordering of creation in its own terms. God the Holy Trinity doesn't need anything from us or the rest of creation. It is a free gift of love. The creation lives on its own terms, terms set by the Creator but not violated by Christ. Rather, the finite shows the capacity it always had but never realized until the death and resurrection of Jesus.

This means that for you and me, God does not enter our life to fill in something missing, either in us or in God. Rather, God reorders the terms of our existence, through Jesus. Specifically, by making each of us a part of the Body of Christ, the living continuation of Christ in creation. This communion is of people who are each born into it and are now empowered to be as Jesus is: the beloved children of God, sharing the divine life that never ends.

This is no accident. Jesus wasn't. Neither are you. We are each becoming "God-bearers" like Mary, and guardians of God's mystery, like Joseph. We do have to agree to it as they did. Just as God did not muscle his way into the creation, neither does the Spirit force herself into our lives. We have to agree to follow Jesus, as he agreed to suffering and death. And we have to allow the Holy Spirit to shape us ever more into becoming Christ, Christ to God and to the whole creation.

But none of us is fully ready for this yet. We are just newly born ourselves. As Saint John writes, "to all who have received him, who believe in his Name, he has given power to become children of God. Born not of blood, or of the will of a human father, but of God. And the Word became flesh..."

That was then. Now the Word is becoming you and me.

So I invite you to take a new look at the Nativity scene. Between the ox and the donkey, the mother and the father, the One who is lying in the crib is not Jesus now.

You are. I am. We are. And like that baby long ago, we are just getting started.