

**Faith Mennonite Church**  
**Advent 4, December 23, 2007**

**“The birth of hope”**

*Isaiah 7:10-16; Romans 1:1-7; Matthew 1:18-25*

During the past decade in the United States, women and couples have been delaying the birth of their first child. Many women want to get established in a career before beginning a family because child-bearing and early care still fall primarily to the mother. Society now sends powerful message that a couple should be well-established financially and be able to fully outfit a nursery and purchase all the accoutrements considered essential for raising a child, before one takes on this huge responsibility. It's all very calculated as if we're really in control of our entire lives or as if financial stability is a guarantee of a “happily ever after life.”

The irony is that delaying fertility often lowers a woman's chance of becoming pregnant, and then a new calculation begins: Will we accept our childlessness and find other ways to be fruitful? Will we use fertility treatments, and if so, which kind and at what expense? Will we adopt, and if so, will it be domestic or foreign, a baby or an older child, one child or a sibling group, a healthy child or one with special needs?

As daunting as this array of choices might seem, once the desire for a child has emerged, it becomes a powerful, driving force. Some explain it in purely mechanistic ways—the ticking of the biological clock. But I believe it goes much deeper and is based in the very love that created us. The God of Genesis is a fruitful God, and the tenderness that we find in Genesis 2 creation account, of God playing in muddy clay and shaping the first humans, suggests that we, the created, will share this desire—to be fruitful, co-creators with God. God's love is expansive and when two people come together in a committed relationship, their love tends to grow beyond themselves, creating the desire for children, a continuation of our humanity.

Our congregation has seen many signs of this loving force in recent years. It is a thing of joy and celebration, and understandably, cause for pain when the desire is unfulfilled.

All of us who have experienced the joy of birth, be it our own child, or a brother or sister, a niece or nephew, or a grandchild or godchild, will not find it surprising that when the world has needed a savior, a word and sign of hope, God sends it not with showers of gold, not with flashing arrows from the clouds, but in the flesh and innocent cry of a newborn baby.

In our Isaiah text this morning, King Ahaz is faced with a national crisis. Both Israel and Syria are poised to do battle against Judah for she has refused to join them in an alliance against Assyria. God sends the prophet Isaiah to Ahaz with the message that he should not fear or grow faint. God tells King Ahaz to ask for a sign from God. But King Ahaz is too distressed to even venture to ask for a sign. He says he does not want to put God to a test, but perhaps it is his own faith that he is afraid to test. But God doesn't take Ahaz's no as the final word. He gives a sign anyway: A young woman has conceived and will bear a child, its name will be Emmanuel, God-with-us. And before that child reaches adolescence, Israel and Syria will both be trampled. King Ahaz was to trust that his “weak” refusal to fight, like the weakness of a baby, would win the day.

Nearing the end of the 40-some-year reign of Herod the Great, who had been placed in power by the Romans and was known for brutal treatment of those closest to him, including his family, the people of Israel again had a deep longing and desire for a sign of God's presence. Most of those desires were placed on the long-awaited Messiah, one who would restore the

fortunes of David, bringing justice and prosperity. One who would re-establish Israel to a place of prominence and not simply play off Roman and Jewish factions against each other for personal gain as Herod did.

The sign, as recorded in Matthew's gospel, is vulnerable at both the personal and political level. Mary is "found to be pregnant" while she is still living in the home of her parents, formally engaged to Joseph, but not yet having taken up residence with him. It's not clear to what extent the law was still enforced for such indiscretions at that time, but OT law called for the death of the promiscuous woman and, in certain situations, of her consort or rapist. Jesus was born into a Near Eastern culture of family honor and shame, similar to that which still harshly penalizes women in many parts of the world.

Mary is thus in a potentially threatening situation, but she is fortunate to be engaged to Joseph who is not only a just man, but also compassionate. Initially the compassionate way to be just, following the letter of the law, was to divorce Mary quietly, not drawing attention to her situation. But then God speaks in a dream and Joseph finds that there is a justice that goes beyond the law – he is to take Mary as his wife, and adopt this child, whom he has not fathered, into his lineage. In trusting God's voice in his dream, Joseph in a sense enters Mary's vulnerable state, while at the same time offering protection to Mary and the child.

Of course, the true protector and giver of life in this story is God. Jesus enters the world, just as he will leave it, in a physically vulnerable state. "The first miracle in the NT is not something that Jesus did," writes M. Eugene Boring in the *New Interpreter's Bible Commentary*. "It is an act of God. The Gospel is not the story of amazing things done by Jesus but what God does for humanity through the Jesus event" (Boring 1995). And Jesus' relationship to God is not proved by his virgin birth, which Matthew gives no further mention to, but by the words of Paul in Romans, that Jesus was "declared to be Son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead" (1:4).

In Advent and Christmas we await and we celebrate this hope that turns conventional wisdom on its head. When tyrants like Herod rage, God works through gentle ways, like the birth of a baby. When Gerald and I were in Central America with MCC, a number of MCCers in the region were living in rather dangerous settings. Folks back home often wondered about our safety. The best response that we gave in those days was the fact that lots of MCC babies were born during that time!

When God needs people to listen to God's voice and carry out God's ways, God chooses the lowly and unsuspecting likes of Mary and Joseph and Isaiah, not the most polished orators or the most skilled accomplished diplomats. I will never forget the eloquence of illiterate El Salvadoran peasants, confined to life in a refugee camp built on a rocky mesa in western Honduras, who spoke with delegations that visited the camp and asked them to be their voices to the world because they were not able to get their message out in any other way. They spoke with an authority that comes from the lived experience of suffering

And when laws, created for the welfare of a community threaten to hurt some of the most vulnerable, God's spirit breathes love and hope that exceeds the law. Back in the 80s this church was a sanctuary for Central American refugees. Today, a large part of the Christian community in this country holds the letter of the law above the welfare of families who are being separated by immigration raids and forced expulsions of undocumented persons. Goshen College president Jim Brenneman reminds the church that the Old Testament position from Deuteronomy to the prophets always sides with the widowers and foreigners—society's most vulnerable.

While God is the actor and doesn't necessarily wait for people's invitation to act, God desires to work in and through people, through you and me. Just as God played in the mud at creation, God wishes to shape each of us, so that we in turn can be filled with hope and work to shape the world around us. And it doesn't matter where we begin. We can be paralyzed by fear or depression like King Ahab, without the energy to hold out a hand to God. Or we can be seeking to do what's right, like Joseph was, and still need a clearer vision. God's word to all of us is "Do not be afraid. Emmanuel—God is with us."

In the next 11 months, during the political primaries and election campaign, we will no doubt hear much rhetoric about terrorism, national security, and the unlawful presence of undocumented immigrants in this country. There will be battles over who best represents "Christian" values. Let us carry the hope we have celebrated in this season into the coming months and year. While national-level politics and programs are important, let us remember that the small things we do—in caring for a child, in sharing a pair of mittens with an immigrant worker, in treating everyone with whom we interact with utmost love and respect—all of these reflect the immense love of God demonstrated in the birth of a child. Let us come and adore him. Let us reflect the light of Christ in the world.

Joetta Schlabach

M. Eugene Boring, *New Interpreter's Bible Vol. 8: Matthew & Mark*, Abingdon Press 1995