

Fewer Conundrums, More Paradox
A Christmas Meditation on Luke 2:1-20
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Preached Christmas Eve, 2013 at San José, Costa Rica

If you've ever shopped for a child, perhaps you experienced one of a parents' greatest Christmas conundrums: do I buy the gifts my kids tell me they REALLY want, or the ones I know they will play with for a lot longer. For me, this makes the other pressing Christmas questions about trees (real or artificial?), fruitcakes (regift them or put them straight in the trash?), and eggnog (with rum or without?) pale in significance. There is nothing more wonderful than seeing a child's face when they get exactly what they have been begging for months to receive. But there is also no greater disappointment than seeing that gift accumulating dust just a few days after the blessed morning because it was really more style than substance. I can't say it is a conundrum that has kept me awake at night, but it is surely one that has consumed more of my time than is spiritually advisable. You see, I should be more concerned with the paradox of the season than its conundrums.

You will remember that a conundrum is a "puzzling question or problem," the classic example of which is the riddle, "What's the difference between a jeweler and a jailer? One sells watches and the other watches cells." To be sure, the choice of a child's gift falls into the category of conundrum. A conundrum makes you put your hand on your chin, grimace, and say, "Hmmm." A paradox, on the

other hand, makes you throw your hands up in the air in praise or surrender, and renders you speechless. A paradox, classically defined, is “a statement or situation that seems contradictory, unbelievable, or absurd but that may be true in fact.” In a conundrum, there is a choice. In a paradox, there is only acceptance. We may have had to deal with a conundrum to get here this evening – which car should we take, should we eat dinner before or after the service, and should it be ham or turkey, that kind of thing. But once here, we are faced with the greatest of all paradoxes, the incarnation of God, God becoming flesh and dwelling among us in the person of Jesus Christ. My hope tonight is that at least for the time we are together, that the Christmas conundrums you may be facing will pale in significance to the paradox we gather to celebrate.

The Shepherds faced no such conundrum when confronted with the paradox of a savior baby. Luke records no debate about what to do with the sheep while the shepherds made haste to Bethlehem to “see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.” Not even their livelihood occasioned a “Hmmm” in the face of the angel’s awesome message. They ran on down that hillside to Bethlehem to experience a paradox. Mary’s treasuring and pondering all the Shepherd’s words reflect an admiration of the amazing paradox she had been experiencing, not an attempt by her to solve some kind of dilemma like should the diapers be cloth or disposable. And the angels had the best seat in the house,

announcing the paradox and watching the others begin to enjoy it. They knew better than anyone what and who was coming into the world.

Former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams describes the coming of Christ, the fulfillment of all of our most earnest hopes and dreams for peace, and communion with God, he describes it as a “shock to the system.” And although I agree with him, it is hard to see the most ordinary of events – the birth of a child, something that happens thousands of times a day all over the world – as very shocking. What happened in Bethlehem is not really so awe-inspiring as we might imagine or hope a Messiah’s coming to be. After all, what it really meant was another decade or two of waiting for things to change, until that child grew up and did what Messiah’s are supposed to do. A more appealing scenario for the Messiah’s shocking arrival might be the one Bill Murray and the rest of the Ghostbusters described a few years ago now: as a disaster of biblical proportions, yes, real Old Testament, wrath-of-God type stuff. Fire and brimstone coming down from the sky. Rivers and seas boiling. Forty years of darkness. Earthquakes, volcanoes, the dead rising from the grave, human sacrifice, dogs and cats living together - mass hysteria. Now, that would be a shock to the system, one we could really wrap our minds around! But a baby? I just visited a newborn baby in the hospital on Saturday. The only thing shocking about that baby was that he wasn’t crying. And yet a baby, not a lightning bolt, ushered in God’s shock to the world’s system. A paradox. While we might expect something with more pizzazz, God

enters the world to judge and save it, and does it in the most unlikely of ways, by coming as “a child, wrapped in bands of cloth, and lying in a manger.” That which is utterly and completely “not human” entering fully into human life and existence is indeed a paradox of the best and most holy kind.

The funny thing about paradoxes is that in the end, they convict us not on the basis of their merits, but because they simply overwhelm us. We can never really solve them, so we have to settle for letting them solve us. Whereas with a conundrum we can weigh the pros and cons of each side, with a paradox the only choice we have is whether or not to fully appreciate it, to live in it, to be transformed by it. Our English word “paradox” comes from a Latin word that means something like “beyond belief” or beyond our ability to think about it, something which puts us in our place, which makes us recognize that we are not the center of the universe, that whoever created that paradox for us has something on us. And maybe it is precisely paradox that gives rise to praise, for praise is that natural response to something that overwhelms us. Think of the Grand Canyon, the first flower of spring, a newborn baby, whatever makes you drop your jaw or forget about everything else. That is stuff over which we have absolutely no control. And in each of these experiences, it is the authenticity, the genuineness, the lack of ulterior human motive, the fact that it is not contrived or manufactured that makes all the difference.

Which brings us to the mall, and my original conundrum. I have never been a big fan of shopping for Christmas gifts. I've always a general feeling of unease about the whole matter. I used to think it was a question of money, but since the feeling hasn't gone away even with more disposable income, I've had to eliminate that reason. It is not that I have so many gifts to buy because my family and circle of friends is pretty small really. And I am not averse to gift-giving or receiving. (I've tried giving no gifts at all, trying to find the perfect gift, even trying to get everything on someone's list.) But in spite of all those things, Flora and I have observed that if you send us out to go Christmas shopping for others, you can be pretty well assured that we'll come home with things only for ourselves.

But finally this year, as I walked through the mall, I came to a realization about this hangup I have about Christmas gifts. It occurred to me that what bothers me is the expectation of gift-giving during the holidays, an expectation which seems to betray the very idea of a gift, at least from a Christian perspective. After all, a gift given under duress is no gift at all. That's called extortion. A gift given from guilt or to avoid some consequences is no gift at all. That's called blood money. A gift given for something in return is no gift at all. That's called that a bribe. And so, the only gift worth giving is the surprise gift, a gift offered unexpectedly, a gift offered with "no strings attached," a gift like the Christ Child in the manger, given unexpectedly to Mary, Joseph, the Shepherds, and "all the people." The best gifts then are the paradoxical gifts, the ones which when given

cause their recipients to throw their hands up in the air in praise or surrender, not because it was what they wanted, but simply because it was given to them. Maybe my conundrum is solved. No gifts for the kids this year. Hmmmm.

I want to close by sharing a poem by the great Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore. It is called "The Last Bargain."

"Come and hire me," I cried, while in the morning I was walking on the stone-paved road.

Sword in hand, the King came in his chariot.

He held my hand and said, "I will hire you with my power."

But his power counted for nought, and he went away in his chariot.

In the heat of the midday the houses stood with shut doors.

I wandered along the crooked lane.

An old man came out with his bag of gold.

He pondered and said, "I will hire you with my money."

He weighed his coins one by one, but I turned away.

It was evening. The garden hedge was all aflower.

The fair maid came out and said, "I will hire you with a smile."

Her smile paled and melted into tears, and she went back alone into the dark.

The sun glistened on the sand, and the sea waves broke waywardly.

A child sat playing with shells.

He raised his head and seemed to know me, and said, "I hire you with nothing."

From thenceforward that bargain struck in child's play made me a free man.

Although it is usually best to let poetry go unanalyzed, it is important that the point not be missed. "Come and hire me," says the main character, "Give me a place, a role, an adventure in which to invest myself." He is willing to give himself completely, yet none of the comers, with their offers of various kinds of payment, seem worth the effort, no matter how enticing, except for the one who offers

nothing in the world. And the child is the only one worth following. The paradox of Tagore's poem is that he who went seeking work, and passed up reward of all kinds, ended up working for nothing yet experienced it as freedom. So it is with Christ.

Brothers and sisters, my prayer for all of us is that we come face to face with fewer conundrums and more paradoxes, and that we will see anew that even amid the crassness and the commercialization of our holy day, Christ still offers us an authenticity, a genuineness that bids us follow. Neither power, wealth, nor romance have the power to draw us near. But approaching, and being approached by, the Christ child, we find ourselves willing to follow that child. In the story of Christ's birth, may you find a surprising and unexpected gift, may you be overwhelmed by the love God has for you, may it be a shock to your system, and may you taken in and transformed by the great and wonderful paradox of God entering into a human life, so that we humans might find eternal life. Amen.