

St. John's Parish
Clayton, CA
December 23, 2007

Sermon preached by Deacon Chris McManus

Tuesday night we returned home from our latest trip to Africa, and I was catching up on the headlines from 10-days-worth of newspapers. I came across this front-page article in which Rudy Giuliani was giving advice to the city of San Francisco about how to deal with the homeless.

Mr. Giuliani said that cities cannot encourage the impression that the homeless "have the right to live on the street." . . .

And I read that sentence and had to go back to read it again, because I couldn't believe he could possibly have said that: the homeless do not have the right to live on the street. The homeless are, by definition, people without private space to which they have rights. They have only the public space in which to exist. And now the front runner for the Republican nomination for president says that people who have no means to acquire private space do not have the right to live in the public space either. And he says this on the front page of the *San Francisco Chronicle* without any challenge or opposing view being presented by a legal scholar or advocate for the homeless. And I thought, what in the world is wrong with us?

Tuesday we will celebrate the birth of perhaps the most famous homeless person in history, although if Mr. Giuliani had been in charge of Bethlehem, he surely would not have encouraged the impression that women in labor can give birth in barns. The Luke gospel which we will hear tomorrow night simply says that there "was no place for them in the inn." Probably this was an economic issue. In my experience, if you have enough money, you can find a warm and safe place to spend the night. But Mary and Joseph were poor and didn't seem to have a lot of options. No one with other options would undertake a journey of that distance in the ninth month of pregnancy without any provision for a place to stay.

Or perhaps it was an issue of kindness. I've had many kind people give me a place to spend the night over my life. But on this particular day, Mary had neither money nor kindness, and so Jesus was born "rough," out in the open, as are many more babies born today than you would imagine.

As I was reflecting on Mary's pregnancy, I could not help but think about the daughter of my friend in Sierra Leone, Mamie Lamin. Mamie Lamin is the head traditional birth attendant in the catchment area of our village, Pellie. A couple of months ago, her daughter died in premature childbirth. At seven months the daughter began bleeding and went into premature labor. She began walking from her village to Pellie, where her mother lives and where the clinic is located. Along the way, she lost her baby. People found her lying along the road bleeding, and, although they organized a hammock to carry her, she died en route to the clinic.

And I think about other babies we have known who were born "rough": Sand Baby, Donkey Cart Baby, Little Crumb, all babies in Senegal whose fate is unknown to me.

Today's gospel gives us additional information about the circumstances surrounding the birth or, more precisely, the conception of one called Emmanuel, "God is with us." The gospel tells us that Mary became pregnant before she and Joseph were married, and about Joseph's reaction to this news. The Bible says that Joseph was a "righteous" man and wasn't going to publicly humiliate Mary by publicizing the fact that she had gotten pregnant prior to their marriage, and not by him. But neither was he planning to keep her as his wife and to legitimize the child.

This was no doubt a tense time for Mary and for Joseph. He may have been righteous in the sense of not being vengeful against Mary. But he wasn't trusting or even forgiving. His original plan would not have been an easy life for Mary and Jesus. She would never be able to marry. Jesus would be illegitimate. They would live in poverty.

But Joseph has a dream and a religious experience which convinces him to change his plan and to raise Jesus as his own child, although rumors and

ridicule about Jesus' illegitimacy follow him throughout his life. So this is what Matthew chooses to tell us about the birth of Jesus the Messiah—that he was born under a cloud of suspicion about his origins. And so this baby, born out in the rough to poor parents who had a rocky start to their marriage, is called Emmanuel, which means “God is with us.”

Many years ago a good friend of mine went through a two-year project with a therapist, artists, and a group of women whereby each woman created a life-sized doll representing herself and a diorama to house this doll. At the end of the two-year period, all these dolls and dioramas were exhibited in Berkeley, and I went with my friend to the exhibit.

Each display represented the essence of the woman who created it. Some illustrated early family dynamics that had shaped the woman; others showed the woman in her various relationships with the world or surrounded by objects that symbolized essential parts of her. The Christmas Gospel in John says that the Word of God became human and lived among us. I picture it like one of these dioramas. God wants to express to us the essence of being God, so God sets up this diorama of God's self living among creation.

So what does God's diorama tell us? First, that God is with us. That's the most important thing in this whole story. In fact, that is the title of the diorama: God is with us. Second, that God is most especially with those in need, including those who are poor, who are homeless, who are judged by society for failing to meet its norms. Finally, that God does not claim the prerogatives of Godness, but comes to us as one who is vulnerable.

This is not a God who sets himself up in a lavish temple. This is a God who is totally at the mercy of creation. He is almost banished from the family before he is born. He becomes a political refugee while still a baby. But even more fundamentally, the story is that God becomes dependent on fallible creatures for his very existence—for food and shelter, warmth, even changing his diapers. The God of creation with a dirty diaper. This fact for me is the source of our Christian hope.

I have never been that into Easter, although I continue to try to understand the meaning of resurrection. Rising from the dead? That's what you'd expect God to do. But being born in a barn? That is not what one expects from God. One expects God to fix everything, like rising from the dead. But far more profound is a God who, rather than fixing everything, is in everything with us, always, vulnerable, loving us.

I had lunch the other day with a woman, a psychotherapist in San Francisco whose son is in Sierra Leone doing volunteer work. And she asked me something like how do you keep going. The question caught me off guard, because it had never crossed my mind. The work I do is so joyous. I can't imagine not doing it. This is where God is. What an amazing thing.

Also while we were in Sierra Leone this month we met the two-month-old son of Sulaiman, the dispenser at the Pellie clinic. I asked them what they named the baby, and they replied, "Emmanuel Franklin Koroma." Then his mother, Isha, asked me, "It's a good name for a Christian baby, don't you think?" Yeah, I do. Amen.