

## SUDDENLY A CHILD

Suddenly angels. Suddenly a journey. Now, suddenly a child. I already overheard somebody remark, when they heard the sermon title a few days ago, that babies aren't that much of a surprise: people know when a baby is on the way; there is no such thing as "suddenly a child." Of course, that was a woman talking. And what do *women* know about it?

Well, it was a true and telling remark from a mother's perspective – from the personal point of view. The baby was no surprise to Mary, or even to Joseph. But the world does not always operate from the personal perspective or out of awareness and caring and understanding. That's part of the drama of Christmas. For one thousand years, the nation had waited for Messiah. And what happens when you wait for something that long? If you have to wait for something for even a year, some of the enthusiasm wears thin, doesn't it? And if you are not totally sure it will ever come and you have to wait for as many as five years – just in hopeful expectation – it is almost impossible to sustain the expectation. So if you keep getting helpful signs and hints and messages that the thing is really coming, that helps. But as time drags on, we tend to go on about our affairs the best we can. And if the hoped-for event finally comes, well, we'll be glad enough about it. "But don't try to get me all worked up in the meantime," we tend to say, or at least feel.

The parking lot was supposed to be all paved by the time I came back from vacation at the end of August. Sometime in October I started hearing myself say, "Yes, well, I'll believe it when I see it." That did not mean I did not want it to happen. It meant I was tired of keeping my hopes up from moment to moment. I was just going to wait until it really happened, and do the best I could in the meantime. That has been only three and a half months so far. Imagine waiting one thousand years!

Then all at once, it seems, suddenly it all comes together. Suddenly it really happens. It is often a great shock – an immense surprise – when the very thing we have wanted most, hoped for, worked for, and lived for suddenly actually comes together, actually happens, is actually accomplished. Parking lots are much too mundane for illustration, but have you ever seen the face of an Olympic gold medal winner? How many years have they worked, sweated, trained, planned, and sacrificed? How much of a surprise could it really be? Yet the surprise is enormous.

Suddenly a child. Suddenly THE CHILD. Nobody was prepared. Everybody was supposed to be expecting, but nobody knew “when” or “how” – and more and more were adding “if.” “Come, thou long-expected Jesus.” But if it does happen, the surprise is enormous. And who said? How do we know for sure? What’s the proof? And all the rest.

We still identify because the Gospels make it very clear that every single person has to deal with this “coming” personally. We tell each other, yet truly nobody can tell another. Every single person must come in their own way and time to conclude whatever they will about this child. That is what the rest of the Gospel stories are about: what people, one by one, decide to think and believe and do about this new PERSON in their midst.

Suddenly a child. Maybe it shouldn’t be a surprise, but it *is* a surprise. I guess it is not necessary to tell anybody who has experienced it what a dramatic change it is when a child comes into your life. And maybe it is not possible to tell anybody who has *not* experienced it, because the changes are more than mere logic or intellect can fathom.

If somebody else has a child, that’s nice. I can rejoice and be happy for them. I may even think about it deeply or strongly. I may concentrate on the wonder of it with every fiber of my being. Then I go home and read my book, go to sleep, and get up and go on with my own affairs. It is not my child. I think I am aware when a friend has a child, yet I am not truly aware. They do not get to go home to read their book or to a restful night or to rise the next morning and go on with their own affairs as usual. The new baby is ever-present. Need I say more?

Yes, there is a bit more to say. It is the cumulative effect that eludes us when we try to put ourselves in another’s place. It is not just for one day. If it is your child, then day and night for years to come, that child will never be entirely out of your consciousness. It is the most major impingement imaginable on one’s life. There is another being besides yourself that must always be considered. Every place you go, everything you want to do, every plan you make, everywhere you turn – the child is also to be considered, to be cared about, to be cared for. And it is that way all the time, twenty-four hours every day, week after week, for years to come. Nothing is ever the same again!

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Do you hear it? “Unto us, a child is born. Unto us, a son is given.” Is it your child? Is this one for you too, or is it merely somebody else’s? Christmas always ends up asking us that question on some level. And when we know that it has come for us too – that we will never go anywhere again without this child – then the mystery and the miracle surround us and become part of our consciousness too.

As we all know, babies grow, keep growing, and keep going through new phases and stages. I heard someone worrying and fretting about their child’s new situation just the other day, and it surprised me (though it shouldn’t have) to discover that this child we were worrying about was fifty-six years old. Among other things, children are God’s way of teaching us about what we have already been through. Naturally, when we were going through it ourselves, we were too busy to understand it. Even more important than that: if Christmas comes for us too, then the child grows and takes us through every truth and phase and stage of life.

Suddenly a child. And all life changes for us if it is our child too. And knowing this child does carry us into all the levels of truth and love and obedience that Jesus grows into and reveals and enacts.

Suddenly angels. Suddenly a journey. Suddenly a child. Christmas is a “new child” for everyone who receives Christmas. It is a new relationship – a new BEING – in your life. And it is not always mild or unobtrusive. It gets us up at all hours of the day and night. There are new priorities all over the place, and new responsibilities, new expenses, new cares. And how do we talk about the joy? Some things do not go into words.

Seeing all the turmoil, all the changes, all the new expenses and responsibilities – feeling compassion for all the lost sleep, restricted activities, and how people can never be the way they were before – you might think we would all get together and go to new parents and take their children from them. Would they not bless us and be grateful to us forever for relieving them of such an incredible burden? Yes, we even jest about it. (“Hey, I think I’ll keep this one.” “Sure, you can have that one.”) But it would be a regretful thing if we really tried it. You see, there is no way to talk about the joy or the love.

That is what the Roman Empire said to the early Christians: “This child is a burden to you. This child is making your life difficult and taking time away from more important affairs. You could be much

richer, happier, more popular, more productive without this child. Here, let us take the child from you and you will enjoy all the benefits of our great empire.” And the Christians said, “Guess again! We will give up our lives, but never will we give up this child.” And Rome could not understand, so they showed it. But the most incredible thing of all is the note that still sounds through all the years that separate us: despite the circumstances and travail, the note that still sounds loudest down all those corridors of time is a note of joy and love. They loved this child, this man, this Lord and Christ.

Suddenly a child. And the child was turmoil and change and all that we have said, and far more. Only, the child was worth it – infinitely worth it! And even such language is crass and poor. For this child is the beginning: the beginning of the finding of everything that matters. And it will never be the same again – never ever – thank God!

A wealthy man died, apparently without leaving a will. Consequently, according to law, the estate was to be divided among the several surviving cousins who were his next of kin. Also as prescribed by law, the deceased’s household goods and other items of personal property were to be converted into cash through a public auction.

During the sale, the auctioneer held up a framed photograph but no one bid on it, including the cousins. Later, a woman approached the auctioneer and asked if she might purchase the picture for a dollar, which was all she had. She wanted the picture, she said, because it was a picture of the deceased man’s only son.

She went on to relate that she had been a servant in the deceased man’s household when the boy had lost his life trying to rescue a drowning man. She had loved and respected the young man very much. The auctioneer accepted the dollar and the woman happily returned home and set the photograph on a table beside her bed.

The story should end there, and I hate to ruin it. But that same night the woman was bothered by a bulge in the back of the frame. It was unsightly and she undid the backing to repair it. To her amazement, it was the rich man’s will – signed, notarized, and valid. Among its brief comments, this statement stood out: “I give and bequeath all my possessions to the person who cares enough for my son to cherish this photograph.”

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I don't really suppose that this story crosses over from its own inherent stance and meaning to a true image of sound Christian theology. But my heart hears it anyway. You can talk to me all you want about "Don't give us Good Friday or Easter on Christmas." But I know the other end of the story and so do you. Without it, Christmas wouldn't mean a thing!

The child of God was also lost trying to save others. Even more than the wealthy man's son, He was rejected, hated, and dishonored – and then forgotten. Too many times I have forgotten. Too much, on some days, I still forget. And something in me loves the servant woman who did not forget. I want to become one who never forgets. And so I love the story. It also reminds me that Christmas is something to do something about – something to keep changing my life for. And so I am grateful.

Suddenly a child. And the child is for us. And no matter what trouble or travail, it brings joy and love beyond telling.

And I hate to ruin the story for you, but it is not mine, so I tell it like it is: God does bequeath all the riches of God's vast Kingdom to whoever cares enough for the Son to remember and cherish His picture.