

"A Likely Story"
Sermon for the Fourth Sunday of Advent
24 December 1995
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[texts: Is. 7:10-14/Rom. 1:1-7/Mt. 1:18-24]

Christina Rossetti's lovely poem, 'In the Bleak Midwinter,' provides an apt background for us today. "In the bleak midwinter, Frosty wind made moan, Earth stood hard as iron, water like a stone; Snow had fallen, snow on snow, Snow on snow, In the bleak midwinter, long ago." A beautiful picture, isn't it? Yet, the hard, cold facts are that Israel is a Mediterranean country -- snow doesn't enter the picture in most places. What we heard was a northern European vision of what it must have been like when Jesus was born. It's one of those things that we can say "A likely story" to -- with just the right hint of skepticism.

Consider Joseph's situation, in the bleak midwinter, long ago. Here he's ready to take a young woman to wife, only to discover she's pregnant! And by whom? God! A likely story, indeed!

The situation surrounding the birth of Jesus and the whole development of the Christmas tradition provide abundant material for the skeptic. Attempts to demythologize and deconstruct the life of Jesus have been going on long before it became popular during the Enlightenment. The Greek philosopher Celsus, writing about the year 170 AD, first raised the charge that Jesus was the illegitimate son of a Roman soldier. (He even provided the soldier's name: Panthera.) Celsus basically said that Jesus was a magician who fabricated the story of his birth to give himself credibility. Porphyry, another philosopher, would also question Jesus' divinity, but would do it using the Christian scriptures as his source; though he did think Jesus to be a wise man, a great sage. Later the Emperor Julian (called 'the Apostate' because he had been raised a Christian) also rejected Jesus' divinity and argued he was just a rebellious Jew. The list of 'Jesus-debunkers' could go on-and-on, so I'll just add one more notable individual -- Thomas Jefferson. Jefferson decided that Jesus was a great "moral philosopher" and the Gospels a good source of ethical teaching, once all the miraculous additions were removed. So, Mr. Jefferson did two different 'extracts' from the Gospels, "The Philosophy of

Jesus" and "The Life and Morals of Jesus." In both the birth story is quite brief, and quite rational.

The desire to reduce faith to rationality is perennial. It has been the task of saints, as well as skeptics. Yet it has also brought confusion and a "bleak midwinter" to the understanding of Christian faith as it has been historically, classically taught. Drew University professor, Thomas Oden, who calls himself a "recovering liberal," describes the problem in his brilliant critique of the modern Church and theological scene, Requiem. ...much of what has been studied in liberated religion under the heading of "theology" has nothing whatsoever to do with God or God's revelation or God's church or the worship of God. What is meant by theology (in the adulterated stream following Feuerbach, Tillich, Jung, Eliade, Daly, Fox, and a thousand echoes) can range to anything from alpha rhythms to Zen, from comparative anthropology to socialist dialectics, from semiotics to sand castles, from gender research to flower arrangement, from chaos theory to cholesterol control. There is no assumed requirement that "theo"logy thus conceived need have anything whatever to do with the revealed God. It can be poetry or astrology or parapsychology, and maybe next year it will be weather forecasting or oral hygiene. . . It makes the Jewish or Christian classicist wonder whether the term *theology* might better be abandoned altogether to the syncretists, and then perhaps we might begin to talk straightforwardly again about the study of God revealed in exodus and resurrection.¹

In short, we have to recover faith as faith. Two philosophical geniuses, Tertullian and Anselm, when asked why they believed responded in a powerful way. Tertullian said he believed because it was absurd. Anselm said he believed in order to understand. Both stressed believing -- when one encounters God, human rationality has to take a back seat because it's inadequate.

"Our God, heaven cannot hold him, Nor earth sustain; Heaven and Earth shall flee away, when he comes to reign; In the bleak midwinter A stable sufficed The Lord God Almighty, Jesus Christ."

What a likely story: God takes flesh and becomes one of us. The prophecy is fulfilled and "God with us" becomes a reality. The distance between Creator and creature is bridged. Humanity has its dignity restored. Life in the here-and-now takes on eternal significance. As

¹Thomas C. Oden, Requiem: A Lament in Three Movements (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), pp. 44-5.

Irenaeus wrote in the year 180: "He appeared as man in the fulness of time, and, being God's Word, He summed up in Himself all things in heaven and on earth. He united man with God and brought about communion between God and man. . . In His immeasurable love, He became what we are in order to make us what He is."² All of this happened because a woman had a baby -- no wonder Joseph had questions!

Yet, this is consistent with how God had worked before. The emphasis has always been on relationship -- the whole experience of Israel recorded in the Old Testament demonstrates God's desire to love his creation. That God should choose to work in this simple and unsophisticated manner should not, then, be surprising. God does the extraordinary in ordinary ways. "As a matter of fact, nothing changed as a result in the life of the times; life went on as it always had, the sun shone as before, men worked or played, did good or evil -- nothing changed. Nor was there apparently any change in the outward lives of Joseph and Mary. This fact should put us on guard against thinking of the events of salvation as theatrical in character. They are not. They respect and do not disturb the course of events, and for that very reason we sometimes minimize their importance. Here we are, for example, at the very turning point of world history, for history will be changed and take on an entirely new meaning. Yet, nothing of this appears on the surface. Joseph goes on as before while he waits; he is caught up in the drama, but he is at peace ever since he accepted God's will in faith,"³

"Angels and archangels May have gathered there, Cherubim and seraphim
Thronged the air; But his mother only, In her maiden bless, Worshipped
the beloved with a kiss."

Angel or no -- Joseph struggled with his situation before he finally came to accept the will of God -- and a most unlikely story. Mary's situation must have been similar. After all, her initial response to the announcement was, "How can this be, since I have known not man?" What changed? How could Joseph be at peace or Mary declare herself the Lord's handmaid? It's simple: they had an encounter with the living God and

²Hans Urs von Balthasar, ed., The Scandal of the Incarnation: Irenaeus Against the Heresies (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990), pp. 15, 54.

³Adrian Nocent, O.S.B., The Liturgical Year Volume I: Advent, Christmas, Epiphany Matthew J. O'Connell, trans. (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1977), pp. 152-3.

responded -- as Paul says -- with "obedient faith." It's not something we like to talk about, but the truth is that for us to really come to know God involves a submission on our part to his will. As Irenaeus said, "The Son of God became the Son of man so that through Him we might receive adoption. This takes place when man receives, and bears, and embraces the Son of God."⁴

As long as the story remains just a story, as long as it is only a speculation or a theological concept it's easy to dismiss it with: "a likely story." When the story ceases to be just a story, but a lived encounter with the living God -- then watch out. Skeptics become believers and likely stories become Gospel truth, for "with God all things are possible."

How do we enter the encounter? Let's let Miss Rossetti tell us: "What can I give him, Poor as I am? If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb; If I were a wise man, I would do my part; Yet what I can I give him -- Give my heart."

A likely story, indeed!

⁴op. cit., p. 54.