

## Christmas Eve Reflection: Ready or Not

Will you pray with me? Holy God, you speak to us in word and song and silence. Open our hearts that we may receive your Spirit of love. And now, may the words of my mouth and the thoughts of all of our hearts bring us ever closer to you, O God, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

The darkness deepens. The night grows long and cold. You can hear the wind whistling through the cracks in the walls, the creak of an old tree outside, the scurry or squeak of mice in the hay, the occasional mooing of a cow or braying of a donkey. Perhaps you hear the yip or the howl of a dog in the distance.

The moans of child birth have increased in intensity. Joseph, not sure how else to help, wipes Mary's sweating brow and tries to believe the words of encouragement he whispers to her: "You're doing great, sweetheart. Not long now. It'll all be okay. Just breathe."

He had hoped they would be home in time for the birth. That his mother and sisters could help Mary. Instead it is just the two of them -- Mary working so hard and Joseph so uncertain. Childbirth is after all the realm of women -- strange, foreign and frightening for him. But here they are. And Joseph is thankful for the shelter of a stable on this cold winter's night, thankful for the animals around them -- the cows, donkey and sheep whose bodies and breath add some warmth to the otherwise chill air. At this point, the smell does not even matter.

At long last the labor comes to an end -- there has been nothing dignified much less serene or romantic about it. Birth is loud, smelly, messy, difficult, often slow, and almost always dangerous work -- especially some 2,000 years ago. At long last, out comes the slippery mass of a baby -- all head and limbs.

And then. Then there is the moment of quiet anticipation: all fear, hope and silent prayers. At last a sharp cry -- life! And with that cry, laughter - - Mary's and Joseph's -- and relief, exhausted relief. He is born! Jesus is born! Mary has survived the ordeal, and their baby is alive! Hastily and awkwardly, Joseph wraps the squalling baby in swaddling clothes and hands him to his mother who takes him into her arms still laughing but also, Joseph notices, weeping.

God comes to us thus -- in the birth of a baby. What could possibly be more mundane, more undignified? What could be less newsworthy than the birth of a baby? Births happen all the time. Everywhere. Four babies are born every second in our world -- that's two hundred and forty babies EVERY MINUTE.

And what could possibly be more miraculous? 2,000 years ago or today than the birth of a child? God comes to us thus -- in total vulnerability. Needing to be taken care of, provided for, protected, taught, guided, and most of all loved.

God comes to us thus. And meets us thus. Just as we are -- house cleaned, stockings stuffed and presents wrapped. Or not.

Church attended, scriptures read and carols sung. Or not.

God comes to us thus and meets us thus -- just as we are -- whether anxious, angry and resentful or filled with God's peace, love and joy. Just as God entered the world by way of the painful, messy, undignified process of childbirth, God enters into the messiness of our lives just as they are. Just as we are!

Thank goodness! Thank goodness that God sends light to enter our lives and the world whether we are ready or not. Thank goodness that love is born anew whether we are ready or not. Thank goodness that Christ is born. Today. In our crazy beautiful world. In the noise and chaos, the struggle and joy of our lives. And into the vulnerable and open places of our hearts.

The people who have walked in darkness have seen a great light!  
Emmanuel, God is with us!  
Glory to God in the highest and on earth, peace!  
Christ is born! May the light of Christ's love shine in and through our lives -- just as they are, whether we are ready or not.

Let us pray.  
Holy Christ, prepare our hearts for your coming  
That in the midst of cherished traditions and joyful celebrations  
We may make room for your light and your love to shine.

Awaken us and our sleepy world.  
To receive you,  
For we know our house is not yet in order.  
Conflicts remain unresolved.  
The naked are not yet clothed.

Neither are the hungry all fed.  
Many are still imprisoned  
The poor do not hear good news.  
And we struggle to love you, our neighbors or ourselves.  
Stir us, O Christ,  
That we may receive you none-the-less  
Into our hearts, into our homes and into our world.

Renew in us our longing  
For the beloved community in which  
Your light of love leads us towards justice, wholeness, forgiveness, and  
your everlasting way of peace.

Come, Come Emmanuel. Be with us, O God. Amen.