

Rev. Paul A. Hottinger

The Meaning of the Christmas Story **Nativity of the Lord** Thursday,
December 25, 2014, Vigil 4:00 PM Is 9:1-6; Ti 2:11-14; Lk 2:1-14 (So the first thing
God is asking in this Christmas story is that we believe this astounding announcement, the
possibility of a vastly better world.)

I hope this is the beginning of a wonderful celebration for all of you. When I was a child, when I was about in first or second grade, I remember vividly one of the priests of our parish saying to us children, “You know,” he said, “there are many places in the world that have not heard the Christmas story.” I still remember vividly thinking to myself, well, that’s ridiculous; with radio and television the whole world has got to have heard of Christmas by now. But of course that’s not what he meant. He didn’t mean the world hadn’t heard of Christmas. What he said and what he meant was **they hadn’t heard the Christmas story.**

He meant that the meaning of this great event that we celebrate today **is not known or believed in many places in the world and in many hearts in the world.** The Christmas story isn’t just data or information. **It’s an announcement about what life means and the possibilities that lie before us.** The Christmas story says that **God is love and loves the world and has great plans for those who respond to his love.** The Christmas story says that God’s love is so deep that **he is willing to share his life with us in a totally vulnerable way.** And think about it: What is more vulnerable than **an infant**? If we think about the consequences of this story, then we realize that God needed to be nursed and cleaned and cared for and his swaddling clothes had to be changed.

This may offend many preconceptions we have about who God is or what God is like. I believe it was God’s intention to do so, **to challenge our preconceived notions of who God is and what God is like,** and to tell us something new, and to show us something new. **So are we ready to let an infant challenge us? Do we permit ourselves to wonder about what God is like or about what God is doing? Or do we think we already have a handle on that and can’t and don’t need to learn anything new?** The rub is of course that God’s neediness revealed in an infant, in this case Jesus, elicits some kind of response. We have to do something. Every parent knows that **the presence of an infant compels concern and anxiety.** The Christmas story says that concern and anxiety is appropriate from everyone, everyone of good-will, everyone of good-will should have concern and anxiety. Later Jesus will say, “Whatever you did to the least, you did to me.” In other words, **God not only identifies with this infant Jesus, but with all infants and all children and all those who are small or weak or poor or helpless.**

Now this is a great challenge, but it is also a great opportunity. It is a great opportunity for us actually to serve God, to put our faith into action, to make a difference in the world. Obviously we can do nothing directly for God, but indirectly **we can become God’s benefactor, his helper, and his friend by serving the least of his brothers and sisters.**

There is no denying what human beings do is very important on this planet. In fact, **we dominate every aspect of earthly life for better or worse.** War or peace, justice or tyranny, prosperity or poverty all come from decisions people make. People can be motivated by many different desires, some of them very twisted. But no one will be motivated to do

something impossible. **No one will strive to do what he or she believes is impossible.** No one will sacrifice or endure suffering for what cannot be. Here the Christmas story has its first purpose. **It announces the possibility of a vastly better world.** It declares that a holy, just, and peaceful world is possible. In the words of Gabriel the angel, ‘With God all things are possible.’ That’s what he says to Mary. In the minds of many people in the world today that probably sounds astounding and probably unbelievable.

So the first thing God is asking in this Christmas story is that we believe this astounding announcement. We may have to admit that deep down inside we really don’t have this faith yet. If so, then that’s where God is working on you, right now. It’s the first step in God’s plan of salvation, **to believe that a much better world and a holier you is possible.** First we come to the gift of faith; then we have to act on it. **Our faith has to take off into action.** Mary, Joseph, and Jesus lead the way. Their lives were froth with peril and they faced many challenges, but they accomplished what God asked of them. **In Christ new human possibilities were created.** The book of Revelation says it’s “a new heaven and a new earth,” all beginning with this mystery of the Incarnation of God into the flesh of Jesus of Nazareth.

Christ and his first helpers, his first disciples, just started the ball rolling. They never finished the project that will bring about a better world. The rest of people of the world have to get into the act. **Everyone’s choices count.** God never promised to save us in spite of ourselves; **God promised to make salvation possible.** Because God has come to us it is possible for human beings to live a rich, full, human, and holy life. **Jesus is God’s chosen model for all people of what human life should be, can be.** The more people choose to live like Christ, the better human society becomes, but vice versa also: the less people choose to live like Christ, the worse the world becomes. You may judge for yourselves which is more prevalent today.

And don’t make a mistake of blaming leaders. Leaders may or may not be helpful, but actually **this is a cumulative decision of all the people in the world whether we live in a good world or a bad one,** one that’s getting better or one that’s getting worse. The world cannot be saved overnight. By God’s design it will take the cumulative good-will of the vast majority of its citizens for justice to actually blossom and for the blessings of peace to reign. But again, this is possible. Not any one person can do everything, but **there is no one who cannot do something.** We can all start in our families, our place of work, our neighborhoods where we live to try to understand others, to make peace among those who don’t get along, to sow seeds of forgiveness and understanding. This is doable. But good intentions have to take flesh as the Word of God did in Jesus. In celebrating Christmas, **I suggest that each of us decides to make some small step in the direction the gospel calls us.** Do not underestimate the influence you can have on others, and do not underestimate what God can accomplish with your help.