

“SHE WAS NOT STONE”

The Evening Prior to the Nativity of our Lord
Jesus Christ
December 24th, 2009 at 9:00PM
All Saints’ Episcopal Church, Princeton, New
Jersey
The Rev’d Hugh E. Brown, III, DMin

“You will find a child wrapped in bands
of cloth and lying in a manger”

“Why not in a cradle, on the bench, or
on the ground? Because they had no
cradle, bench, table, board or
anything whatever except the manger
of the oxen.

This was the first throne of the King.
In a food pit for an animal.

There in a stable, without man or
maid, lay the Creator of all the world.
And there was the maid of fifteen
years, bringing forth her first born
without water, fire, light or pain—a
sight for tears.

What Joseph did next, nobody
knows. But the scholars say both
Joseph and Mary adored. They must
have marveled that this Child was
the Son of God. But let us never
forget he was a real human being.

And those who say Mary was not a
real mother lose all the joy. He was a
true baby, with flesh, blood hands
and legs. He slept, cried, and did
everything else that a body does—
only without sin.

I am amazed that child did not freeze.
Or that Mary did not die.

I have seen some of the most
beautiful sculptures of Mary. But do
not make of her a stone. She was
flesh and blood. She and Joseph
must have been miserable—and yet
their eyes will still filled with tears or
wonder and joy.

No, they were not stone. They were,
well—tender. If you have found
favor with God, the more Tender You
are.” (From Martin Luther’s
Christmas Book, by Roland Bainton)

These words are from a Christmas
sermon written by the great Reformation
theologian Martin Luther.

The witness to the paradoxical truth
of the Nativity of our Lord—the most
divine is the most human, the most holy
is the most imminent, the most high is
the most vulnerable, the greatest power
is the most—tender.

No, Mary and Joseph were not made
of stone. Neither was and is God. He
was born in vulnerability; he died in
vulnerability.

Beginning this night, God is always
human, when God is most God.

Over the past four weeks we
experienced the wonderful “Great O
Antiphons” to close the Sunday liturgies
of Advent.

For the faithful few who braved the
snow and the most human cold, we cried
out the last of this holy piece of music
with, “O Emmanuel, our King and
Lawgiver, Hope of nations and their
Savior, Come to Save us, Lord our God.”

Duns Scotus, a medieval Franciscan
theologian, says that this was the
original intent long before we ever
sinned or rejected God’s command to
live in the Garden. This mystery of the
Incarnation was part of creation from the
beginning. Now the mystery unfolds
and we are caught up in it this night.

For what is the translation of this last
of the great O Antiphons in the 1974
Liturgy of the Hours: “O Emmanuel we
desire that you be the God of our lives
that you save us from all that holds us
down. Come and set us free!”

No, God is not stone. He told his
servant Moses, “I hear my people cry
and see their suffering.” Now, in the
incarnation, God comes down to where
we are, in the mess of humanity, to
liberate us from all that would hold us
down.

Remember that when the first letters
of the O Antiphons are taken together
backwards, they spell out the great

promise of God: tomorrow I will be there!

God is not stone; I will be there. If you have found favor with God, the more tender you are. You are not Stone. Neither was Mary.

Tender—A complex word. There are some who will not darken the door of a church and who reject the Christian faith because of that word. Christians are tender? You have to be kidding some say. Christianity has justified inquisitions, crusades, wars, slavery, misogyny, sexual abuse of children and adults, the denigration of thought, science and truth. Tender? As the Night! As the terrors of night.

Tender. There are some who will not darken the door of a church and who reject the Christian faith because of that word. Christians are tender? They are weak, passive, irrelevant, disempowered, and content to be abused and pushed around.

Tender. The way Christians interpret it, has nothing to do with either sentimentality or powerlessness; the word Tender is of a God who is not stone. Not deity alone. Nor Power alone. Not vulnerability alone, weakness alone. Not powerless love or loveless power.

But a Child—one of us. One with us.

And, One with another. Power—to uplift and free from All that pushes us down.

Once upon a time a man was rising in his company. The time came when he thought he and his wife should have a formal dinner party, inviting the company president and vice-presidents to their home. It could be the crucial difference between his present job, and a big career move. But he was concerned about one thing—his son. His only son was about five. He was rambunctious and full of energy. How would he behave in such a situation?

Well, he began talking to him about the dinner over the period of a couple of

months, telling gun about its importance and what he must do to help out. He impressed on his son that he had to be on his best behavior, for his father's sake.

He schooled him on the use of forks, knives, spoons and glasses, and plates on the table and over and over again told him not to take anything, but to ask for it, and that someone called a waiter would serve him anything he wanted or needed.

The day came. The cocktail hour went without a glitch. The young son was on his best behavior, quiet and dressed neatly.

Then came the dinner. All was going well, but the boy was full of energy and getting restless, sitting at an angle with his father on his right and his mom right across from him. And he forgot. He was thirsty and reached for a glass of water. He got hold of it, but it was heavier than usual, and he dropped it. It clanged and made a terrible noise. Worse, it fell in the soup and all over the bread plate of the person next to him. He got excited and then and knocked over the wine glass of the person sitting next to him. It was like the chain reaction from hell!

The child sat there, horrified, his face white with terror. He'd done what his father had pleaded with him not to do. He had ruined the party and his Dad's big chance.

The father saw the look of terror on his son's face and was distraught. He then caught his son's eye and...knocked over his own water glass and wine glass into his soup!

Then, he smiled as his son looked so surprised and said, "Let's clean it up together son!" And, they both laughed together and with delight! Even the boy's mother, was absolutely taken aback, with joy, at her husband's response—and they looked at one another with love—for the first time in years.

Who knows what the rest of the table thought? Frankly, the father didn't care.

And, yet, that very week, he received a nice-handwritten note from the company President, nominating him for a job he never thought of nor sought; the President's note was short and direct—he needed someone with “imagination.” And, he added via a PS, “I was truly touched by the way you treated your little boy; we don't need cardboard characters in our firm—we need authenticity—a true leader—and a true man.”

And that's the Incarnation we celebrate tonight—a God not of cardboard—or stone—but of love—sent for us, in Jesus.

The spiritual writer Megan McKenna comments:

“We are slow to understand this kind of love. As you leave the church tonight—stop—in the cool winter of the evening—and be still; wonder, like Mary, like Joseph, adore—like the parents of the babe—over the awesome breadth of God's love for us. We need to sink into the infinite compassion of God and attune our hearts to Mary's cry of birth pain—and her cry of delight and the first notes of her lullaby to God as she rocks him near her heart. God has come to be with us—poor and human—so we might be like God—not of stone—but of compassion beyond imagination.”

Or, maybe only of imagination—as a Dad who, in infinite compassion, knocks his own wine and water into his soup!