

The Rev. Ian Burch
St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI
December 24, 2018 (4:30pm and 11pm)
Christmas Eve

Good evening. Merry Christmas, and welcome.

This story starts on an Easter morning, which is an odd place to begin a Christmas Eve sermon, but bear with me. My friend Claire and her husband had just had their first baby, and there were some complications. The little boy had two tiny holes in his heart, and his liver wasn't working like it was supposed to. The doctors were optimistic and assured the young couple that these things happen and would likely all be fixable. Still, just to be safe, they kept the little boy in the neonatal intensive care unit, with all its beeping lights, wires, isolettes, and anxious parents. Claire was holding up as well as a person could, but still, after a long labor and no sleep, having that first baby arrive sick laid a massive strain on her.

So, on Easter morning, when the little baby was less than a day old, Claire asked me to come and bring Eucharist to her and her husband. Of course, I did. After my parish had said all the Alleluias and read about the Resurrection on Easter morning, I packed up the communion kit and drove over to the hospital to meet the new baby and hopefully bring a little Resurrection life to Claire and her husband.

When I arrived, the new parents looked pretty haggard. The baby was a skinny little thing being baked under a yellow lamp to lessen his jaundice, and my friend was sitting on a little pull out sofa looking haggard. We prayed the prayers of the church and shared bread and wine, as Christians have been doing for two thousand years. And something kind of amazing happened. As we were chatting about the new baby and the next steps for him, Claire casually got up, swaddled the newborn, brought him to her chest, and began to rock and soothe him. I remember thinking that this woman was a brand new mother, and yet she was standing there, comforting this sick newborn like it was the most natural thing in the world. And I wondered what kind of wisdom was living in her bones that allowed her to transform into such a conduit of grace when she had been a mother for less than a day.

There were no shepherds or angels on that Easter morning when I met Claire and her baby in the hospital, but they did show up, two thousand years ago, in Bethlehem. I imagine Mary, also a mother for just a few hours, infused with that same grace that mothers everywhere have known. I imagine her lifting the infant Jesus, swaddling him, and giving him easy comfort in His distress.

I don't want to sentimentalize motherhood. I know that it can be scary, messy, disorienting, and exhausting. I'm sure that is true for Claire, and I'm sure it was true for Mary. And I know that some parents aren't able ever to be that kind of grace for their children. Still, I've been lucky enough to see the strength and the beauty of a parent giving absolute love to a newborn. That simple act of comforting a child in distress is utterly radical. It is an antidote to selfishness. It is self-sacrificial. It powers the whole world.

And this act, repeated around the world millions of times a day, is the precise act in which our God chose to participate. The ancient world was filled with Gods of the sun, of thunder and lightning, of war. But that's not how our God chose to enter the world. God did not choose to become flesh in the palaces of the greatest empires of the world; instead, God chose to become flesh as a child, born of a woman, experiencing the grace of her comfort and the self-sacrifice of her love. And I have to wonder: what of Jesus' teaching later in his life came from the lessons he learned in those early days on earth? Did he care for the poor and the destitute because he was first cared for at his birth? I like to think so.

The love of a child is not sentiment. It is power. It is grace. It is the kind of fierce attention to the needs of the other that characterizes the Christian life. It is the kind of self-sacrifice that Jesus would go on to share with his disciples and with the world. When the world cries, the Christian response is to care for its needs. As Mary is to Jesus, so we are to the world.

On this Christmas Eve, I want you to set your mind on Mary in those first few hours after Jesus was born. I want you to imagine Mary's wonder, her fear, and the wisdom that came to her as it has come to first-time mothers for generations. And when you think about how she looked on her Son, imagine what the world would like if we looked on every human with that same radical, self-sacrificial compassion. What would the world be like if our instinct toward each other was the same self-giving love as a mother to her newborn?

The church teaches us that the world will never be the same because of God's choice to come down to earth in the form of a baby. And I think that's true. But Jesus didn't arrive as a baby alone in the wilderness. He came as a baby to Mary so that God could experience the radical love of a parent for a newborn. May we remember that love on this holy night and bring it out into the world. Merry Christmas. Amen.