

## **Sermon for Christmas Eve, 8 PM**

*Christmas 1, Year B  
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Quite a few years ago some dear friends whom I had known since college called and asked me to join them in the hospital for the birth of their second child. The child to be born would not live. Tests had verified a rare syndrome in which the brain stem had not properly developed, and there would be no regulation of the heart beat or breathing. Nothing could be done to save the child, and she would live for only a brief time after the birth.

I joined them in the delivery room, and when the child was born she was handed into her mother's arms. The mother and father wept, as did I. Somewhere in the time together I said a prayer and blessed and baptized the child. She was named Samantha in those few moments of life. Gently and quietly the child, who seemed to look into her mother's eyes for a few seconds, died. The tears which flowed from mother and father were tears of immeasurable love. The tears spoke of hope incompleting, but also of boundless love and care for this tiny soul, whom they met in this brief bond of life.

By that love, a clinical hospital room became a glorious chapel, a centerpoint of holy ground.

There are a variety of ways to understand how it is that humanity is created in the image of God. One thing for sure, the image of God is not like Michaelangelo's chapel ceiling depiction of an old man with flowing white hair and beard. A more accurate image of God, reflected in the creation of humanity as male and female, is love. The love that surrounded baby Samantha was divine, an intrusion of holiness into the clinical technology of a hospital. In that love of parents for the brief life that was Samantha's, an image of God was visible.

The Christmas story suggests that divine love transformed a stable in Bethlehem into a temple. In many ways we are not unlike the child Samantha. The spans of our lives are longer by far, but they are still but a moment in the grand scale of things. The impairment in our brains is not in the regulation of our heart beats but in a hard-wired outlook on life that engenders fear and selfishness.

The love present in the Christmas stable was surely the love of Mary and Joseph for the infant born, and for each other. We may assume that they were not alone as they found this humble shelter away from the village inns, and that they were in the company of other refugees escaping the evening chill. Among that company there were no doubt women to give comfort and assist with the birth, showing compassion for strangers in

need. There were no doubt men to keep Joseph company with joking and reassurance as he waited for the news that the mother and child were safe. Perhaps there were refugees who prayed for them, and who shared some of their bread or dried figs.

But the great love in the stable was in the child himself. The infant to be named Jesus was born through a love of God for our frail humanity, for you and I who live as sparks of light in the span of eternity. God himself enters into our realm, born as an infant to refugees, whose baby shower was thrown by shepherds drawn to town by angelic witness. We may not be able to draw a picture of the image of God, but on that night God became the image of humanity.

Nothing could have been done for baby Samantha, even with the leaps in medical science since then. But her brief life was totally surrounded by love. In those few moments of life eternity itself was at hand.

It may be said that nothing can be done for us, either — that we are consigned to our sins, consigned to the emptiness of death, consigned to the ravaging flames of chauvinism and bigotry. But for us an intervention is possible, a salvation not achieved through medical skill or technological advancement. For to us a child is born, who is the savior, the messiah, the Lord.

The love of God is not in the earthquake or the fire or the ravages of the judgment we deserve. The love of God is in the helpless weakness of an infant, born into circumstances you and I would pity. From that small life the healing of humanity begins. As God becomes the image of humanity, God unites with us, granting us God's own health and life and love. If my friends, by any power of prayer, by any will of love could have saved their daughter Samantha, they would have done it. Could they have traded their lives for hers, they would have done it.

What is beyond human power, though, is not beyond the power of God. It is not an easy fix for us, or a cheap one. In the end, God does trade his life for ours, and this cavern in Bethlehem eventually gives way to the hillside above Jerusalem on which the cross was raised. The end is already in the beginning, and all the frailness and tenderness surrounding the birth of Jesus Christ is picture of how fully God becomes the image of humankind.

And so for us a child is born, a savior, a prince of peace, the medicine to heal us into love and life. Glory to God in the heavenly heights, and peace to all who live into his favor.