

## Filled with Expectation

- Zephaniah 3:14-20; Isaiah 12:2-6; Philippians 4:4-7; Luke 3:7-18
- December 13, 2009
- W. Kenneth Williams, First Baptist Church of Rochester

My Dearest Brendan,

I present this reflection on the day of your dedication to the Lord. You are just a bit more than 3 months old. When you are about your brother Gavin's age, – that is, almost 10 – you will be able to read and understand this letter, which, in the tradition of the prophets and the New Testament, is being delivered as a sermon.

You are a child born in a time of great change and much conflict. There are wars that seem to have no end. The economy is uncertain and a lot of parents with children like you are out of work. People argue a great deal about how to solve problems like unemployment and health care and how to pay for public education, only to discover that arguing only creates a new problem – we make enemies out of our neighbors by insisting on our own way. It saddens me that arguing has become so constant in our culture that it has actually become a form of entertainment.

I should point out that this is the way it was in Jesus' time. Jesus, as you will discover as you become conscious of Advent and Christmas, was born 2000 years ago. There were wars then, and unemployment, and hunger and homelessness, and all kinds of problems between the government and the culture. Jesus was born in a stable, not in a proper bed or a hospital like you were. In a sense, he was homeless and living among the poor, even as a baby.

But, like you, he was loved. Mary and Joseph, like your mom, Erin, and your father, Jon, were willing to sacrifice their own comfort to make sure that their baby had enough food and a warm place to sleep. Babies can't talk or walk or do anything for themselves. Older people have to take care of them. Even Gavin is learning to care for you. The best kind of care – the kind that doesn't stop when the caregiver gets tired or weak or wants to do something else – comes when love is present.

People seem to love babies very easily. And this is the main reason, I think, that God chose to have Jesus enter the world as a baby. When Jesus grew up, he became a teacher. He taught that people should love each other. They should take care of each other. They should respect each other. He even taught that we should learn to love our enemies, the people who don't like us and don't really care about what happens to us. The love of babies seems to be both natural and contagious.

The Innkeeper, for instance. There were a lot of people looking for rooms in Bethlehem. A lot! The government had said that the people had to go back to the towns where they were born in order to be counted, so everyone had to travel. Some had to travel long distances. There weren't enough hotel rooms. I'm sure the innkeeper turned people away all night long. But, when a very pregnant woman shows up at the door, the innkeeper stops and thinks. This is the beginning of caring. What can I do to help here? There's a baby coming, maybe very soon. This mother needs shelter from the rain and wind. The baby will need warmth. It is not much, but the stable is what I can offer. This, Brendan, is called compassion. It is the first lesson Jesus teaches, even as a baby. When someone has a need and you can fulfill that need, you show compassion. When you cry to be fed or changed, your mother, father, and sometimes even your grandfather, respond to make you comfortable. It is because we love you that we have compassion for you.

Brendan, it is a wonderful thing that you are being dedicated in the middle of the Christmas story. You are helping the story come alive for us. The Christmas story is all about fulfillment of promises and the power of hope. For all of human history people have yearned to experience life in all of its abundance. Well before Jesus was born, maybe 700 years before the story in Bethlehem, the prophet Zephaniah looks beyond the threat of a war with Babylon to a time of restoration and the end of shame. The people were tired of feeling like victims. So the message was: "I will remove disaster from you...I will save the lame and gather the outcast, and will change their shame into praise." "The Lord will exult over you with loud singing."

You see the contrast here, Brendan? Shame and grief will become joy. Just like your mother had to go through pain to give you birth, the joy of your birth erased

the pain. This is the Christmas message to the whole world. Jesus is coming with the message that God wants us to live joyfully.

The name of Jesus means “God is salvation.” Thus, we know him as “savior.” At this time of year we are reminded that he is also given the name of Immanuel, meaning, “God with us.” Names matter. They carry messages of trust, faith, and honor.

Your name, Brendan, is a tribute to your grandmother, Brenda. Your name reminds us that Brenda is with us. The way your grandmother loved God, the way she showed compassion to others, the ways she devoted herself to faithful living all come to mind when we say *your* name. In a way, that is a heavy weight for you to carry. Coming to know your special spirit, I think you will carry it well, and with grace.

Your grandmother could rise above her problems and find joy. Shortly before her death, she wrote a letter to the family in which she said something really important. The way to be happy and joyful is to love and to take care of the health and well-being of other people. She called this “self-less” living. Remember the Innkeeper? Remember caring and compassion? Your grandmother had it. Our job as a family and as a church is to help you to live a compassionate life. We will be successful in that job only if we are living compassionately right in front of your eyes.

Compassion is a part of another big word we use in church, righteousness. This is a big word, even for adults. A righteous person thinks about what is right (the Innkeeper stopped and thought!) and then does it, even if it requires sacrifice of comfort, safety, or security. Righteousness is what John the Baptist preached about. “Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.” He said to tax collectors and soldiers that they should use their power only for good, not for self-gain. You see where your grandmother got all this? It came from the Bible, and from the one that John the Baptist promised would come.

This is the faith of your family, Brendan. Your father learned it from his parents, Jeff and Marilyn. Your mother learned it in the home that Brenda and I made for her and your Uncle Adam. It gives us joy to have faith; it gives us joy to know and

believe that God is working to bring new life into the world. God will overcome shame, grief, and need and bring a Spirit that will change everything. This is the Christmas message.

Because of you, Brendan, the Christmas story is more special to us than ever before. As we welcome you, Brendan, into the community of faith, we renew our covenant with God to tell the story as if it is our story. Love does indeed come down at Christmas. Compassion and caring starts to spread, from the Innkeeper, to the shepherds, to the townspeople; and joy breaks out, and peace comes, and everybody gets enough of what they need.

Yes, Brendan, welcome, to you and all babies like you and Jesus. We have much to learn from you.

Amen.