HAVING BABIES

--a sermon by the Rev. H. Paul Santmire
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Much as I had planned otherwise, Christmas resists the lengthy and multifaceted exposition of texts. Christmas is more conversational than homiletical. Christmas is basically a family reunion.

Christmas is the time, above all others, when we gather together as members of one family. Christmas is the time when all the siblings come together to celebrate the birth of the One dear child in whom we are all adopted as brothers and sisters, and children of the One God, our Creator.

Studies of the message that the early church proclaimed to the world show, interestingly enough, that Christmas was not mentioned! Apparently, right from the start, Christmas was mainly a story treasured within the community, rather than a message proclaimed to the world.

In this spirit, I want to talk with you tonight about a family matter, something rather mundane and domestic actually, -- having babies.

Now you may think that you don't need to be instructed too much about having babies. Your parents told you about these matters sometime ago. A few have also gone through the experience of birth and becoming parents. Having babies is a rather commonplace topic for all of us.

But I would like to suggest that you do need some instruction about having babies, and so do I. Let me tell you why.

To begin with, this world in which we live can be rather bleak at times.

I'm not thinking now of the person who botches an exam or two, ~~now and again~~, although that surely can be traumatic enough. I'm thinking more of the person who has no place to go when the weather of life is cold and the night is long. Someone who has been excluded from her or his own home. Someone who has lost a place to be with loved ones. Someone who has been consigned to prison or to some other wrenching loneliness.

I'm also thinking about the bleakness of our collective life in the twentieth century, where we witness not only the break-up of families, but also the threat of environmental or nuclear destruction to whole populations; where we witness not only individual cases of illness or isolation, but the threat of massive starvation or global disruption wrought by nuclear war.

Who really wants to have babies in a world like this? Who really wants to bring up children in the midst of personal and political turmoil like this?

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I have occasion to speak with couples, from time to time, who are contemplating marriage. One of the things I naturally ask them concerns their plans for children, if any.

One of the things some of them tell me is this: in a world that has the portentious future our world seems to have, why would any caring person want to bring one more child into the world to face all this pain? I sometimes hear students ~~have~~ say exactly the same thing. It's not doing any child a favor, they say, to bring that child into the hectic, disrupted, sometimes hellish world.

With this kind of feeling of hopelessness all around us, maybe permeating into our own souls now and again, ~~we~~ you can stand some instruction about having babies, -- some Christmas instruction. We can benefit deeply, once again, and specifically in this way, by contemplating Mary and Joseph, and the baby Jesus.

The first thing to be said about this Baby is especially radical as far as ~~many~~ women are concerned. For millenia, women have been taught, and many women have believed, that their identity consists in having babies. Well, this Baby, born to Mary, is the Baby to end all babies, in a profound sense.

Theologian Karl Barth, who has many good things to say about Jesus and some things to say about men and women that drive some of us up the wall, has this very good thing to say about the birth of Jesus: now women don't have to have children anymore.

The Messiah has been born. During the Old Testament dispensation it was necessary for Hebrew women to have children. But the Word has now become flesh. God now dwells among us in the person of Jesus, so that all peoples can now be saved.

Therefore, hereafter, no other woman has to have a baby. As far as God's plan is concerned, you are free not to have babies if you are a woman. Your identity is now your identification with the Messiah. No longer is it your identification with your womb.

That's ~~is~~ one thing that we can learn about having babies when we contemplate the Holy Family. We don't have to have babies anymore. We no longer ~~labor~~ -- particularly women -- labor under any such holy necessity.

The birth of that Baby in Bethlehem frees us from any biological or sociological or theological obligation to have ~~babies~~ children. So as a Christian you are free to be celebate, if that is the calling you hear God beckoning to pursue. Likewise, you are free to enter into authentic sexual relationships that carry with them no intention of having ~~babies~~ children.

Everything we need for salvation is given to us in the Messiah, in the birth of this one Baby.

Yet this freedom must be carefully distinguished -- emphatically distinguished -- from that bland and lifeless resignation to hopelessness that seems to be popular in our day.

It's understandable to hear people say that they don't want to bring children into a world like this one. But that also shows that they have yet to contemplate fully the meaning of this one Baby, born to Mary.

The birth of this one baby, according to our ancient confession, means that nothing can separate us from the love of God, that no principality or no power, no institution or no illness, no broken relationship or no pains of loneliness, can consign us for ever to the nothingness of death.

This is the birth, we believe, of the One in whom life, not death, love not loneliness, health not disease, justice not oppression, is to be ultimately vindicated.

So the birth of this One baby means that although you don't have to have a baby to be somebody, in order to find your identity, you are also free to have a ~~baby~~ child.

The birth of this one baby means that we live in a world now whose ultimate horizon is hope, not despair. Hence it's lovely for us, it's liberating for us, to beget and conceive children, when we discern that that's the calling God wants us to pursue. We can have babies, because we can rejoice in the hope of their future, which is sealed, sure and certain, for us in the birth of this one Child of Bethlehem.

Some of you know that one of my favorite songs is from the record "Free to Be You and Me," originally marketed by Ms. Magazine. On that record, Rosie Greer, the former professional football player, the former body guard of Robert Kennedy, -- big, tough Rosie Greer sings: "It's all right to cry, crying gets the sad out of you."

That's right. We Christians especially know that all our tears are sanctified, and all our cries are heard, in the tears and the cries of the One who was born for our sake and who died for our sake. We know that in Him and through Him our cries are heard, that there is indeed Someone Loving, our Parent and Creator, who hears all our tears and joins with us as we cry. So it's all right to cry -- deeply and soulfully.

But even more -- and here I take the liberty of inventing the Song of Mary and Joseph, to go along with the song of Rosie Greer: "It's all right to hope, hoping brings the glad into you."

That's the instruction I wanted to share with you tonight, about having babies, as we gather for this family reunion.

You're free to be the person you deeply want to be. You're free to be a child of hope. You're free to give birth to hope in your life: thanks to the birth of this Child, this dear and darling Baby, in Bethlehem.