



I speak to you today as a sinner to sinners, as the beloved of God to God's beloved, as one called to bear witness to those called to bear witness. Amen.

As many of you know, before I returned to the parish 11 years ago and became the rector of Christchurch Cranbrook, I was a professor for about two decades at different colleges and seminaries in the United States and Canada. And I loved being a teacher. I loved not just knowing my field and being responsible for my field. I loved not just creating curriculum that could change lives and help people progress, but I loved the moment in which I would be suddenly rendered redundant by a student's question.

Actually, to be honest, when I was first out in the field, and a student would disarm me with a difficult question, I would immediately panic. I would say, well, my God, how am I ever going to get tenure? But over the course of a couple of years of teaching, what gave me the greatest joy was that moment in which a student would ask a powerful question. And I would no longer be a teacher, but I would be rendered redundant. I would become a student like them, pondering a mystery. And that really is the goal of good teaching, is to actually invite the student into the greater mystery that captivates you as a student.

And this December, I was teaching a class: Why Was Jesus Born? That was the title of the class. And it was exciting, and I was doing what I used to do as a college professor. I was throwing a lot of art at them, and I was throwing a lot of scripture at them, and I was throwing a lot of philosophy at them, and I was throwing a lot of theology at them. I was throwing a little bit of anthropology at them. I like to really mix it up when I give a lecture and create a kind of salad of meaning, you know, just to really let them feel the complexity of a subject.

And one student, who is also a professor, asked me a simple question. She said, what makes a nativity? And at first I thought, well, I got this one. I study art, I study theology, I study history. A nativity, that's an easy answer. There's always a mother and child. That's the center part. You'll always see a mother and a child. You'll also see a star, which will somehow signify the cross at the same time. The earliest stars, the nativity scenes are elongated at the top and the bottom in the east and west quadrants to kind of create a star. You'll see shepherds. You'll see magi. You'll see a manger. You'll see angels. You'll see animals and you'll often see Joseph.

But I realized after I let that answer tumble out of me, that I didn't really answer the question, what makes a nativity? Because what makes a nativity isn't just a symbolic structure embedded in all of the art and the visual canon that we see in many nativity scenes that you can find in just about any store or drugstore in the area. What makes a nativity is not the presence of that symbolic structure. What makes a nativity is a kind of powerful message of new birth. And that birth is at once the birth of Jesus, who is God made man, and it is also in that same moment, a birth that begins in us.

The message of Christmas is not just that God is born in Christ, it is that God is born in us. We, like Mary, are to be full of Jesus. We are to be bearers of Christ. We are to be bearers of God, and that is what makes a nativity. It's not just about the symbolic structure. It's not just about the way the tableau of a nativity scene somehow captures all of the different accretions of tradition and story and scripture into one beautiful picture. It's that we see in the nativity of Jesus our own birth into this world on a fundamental level.

Hannah Arendt, the great philosopher, writes in a book that was published in 1958, *The Human Condition*, one of the most powerful insights into the nature of life and the nature of civilization – she says that the central core of all things, whether a society is just or loving or not, and whether or not a human life is meaningful or not depends, she says, on natality. What does she mean by natality? She means that just as you and I experience that small miracle of biological births, when a new being comes into the world, so on an existential level, there is a new birth that happens inside us. When we come to a pivot point in our life, when we are changed, when we are made new, often that new birth involves a kind of retrieval of the old, but an embrace of the new. And in that new being, there is the new possibility that comes into being.

Each of us is called to a life project of natality. Each of us is called, in other words, in words more akin to the Christian tradition, each of us is called to live in such a way that when people see us, they see a kind of nativity, they see a new birth. We see that in people who struggle with addiction, who come to the end of their rope, and if you follow the 12 step tradition, come to that point where they turn their life and their will over to God, as they understand them, and place their lives in God's hands. And in that act of surrender, there is a nativity, a new birth. Their biological status is not as important as their existential status in that new birth.

And every society, every civilization is judged on whether or not it creates the conditions in which the many of us who are born biologically and existentially, the many of us who are all born, have the room and safety to come into fullness of who we are created to be. A just society, Arendt says, is a society that protects nativity. And this is an important thing for us to keep in mind because so often the discourse in this world seems to be driven not by natality, but a kind of

necrophilia, a kind of love of death and violence. To be a Christian is to accept that call to natality, that call to nativity inside of us. It is to say, it is not I who live, it is Christ who lives in me, so Saint Paul says in Galatians. It is to say that my world is going to be a world, and everywhere I go, every community I build, there'll be the space for this new creation to come into being.

So when we ask the question, what makes a nativity, a nativity is made not just in art, not just in song, not just in scripture, not just in remembering the stories of our tradition. A nativity happens now. And my question to you tonight is, where is God's nativity in you? Where is God's nativity in this community that we are called to be together? How can we create space for that beautiful newness, that new birth that God is constantly bringing into being? That is what makes a place just, says Arendt. That is what makes a place loving. And we are called, I believe, to make this place in our lives, a place of nativity.

Now, I have been thinking about all of this for the past month or so, and it's partly because I have been so struck by that power and that difference and that dynamic between just the symbolic structure of the nativity and the act of the nativity, if you will, that I began to look at the world with different eyes. And tonight I'm going to share with you one piece of art that I actually found while I was doing what one does if you're a clergy person in the holiday season. I was going to the hospital because if anything is going to go wrong in someone's life, it goes wrong during the holidays. The holidays are stressful. They're struggle, they're a time of comeuppance, they're a time of disappointment, they're a time of loneliness.

And clergy and lay leaders in a congregation are often in the position where we go and visit and spend time with people who are struggling with a loved one who is dying or with an illness that is bringing them down. And I was visiting a Henry Ford Providence Hospital in Southfield, Michigan. I gave you all this in your bulletins today to try to share this with you. And I kept on passing this concrete statue, which was erected, no doubt, when Providence Hospital was founded by the Daughters of Charity, a religious movement in the Roman Catholic Church that started a series of hospitals all around Detroit.

And this statue initially seemed to be kind of commonplace. It was kind of something you see when you're driving past a lawn statue store on the road. But I kept on looking at it and I kept on being taken by it. I don't know the name of the artist, but it's clear that something is going on here. This isn't a depiction of Christ as an infant. It's not a Christmas tableau. It's Christ as a toddler, and to my eyes, Christ as a feverish toddler. And the parents are holding onto this feverish little child, who is Christ, and He is clinging to them. When I see this, I am reminded of the way in which my own eldest child, when she would get a fever, would just cling to my chest and hold on and lay her head on my chest until she could feel better.

And Mary and Joseph are there. And what you see here is that Joseph is more involved than he typically is involved in many nativity scenes as we know them. In many nativity scenes as we know them, Joseph kind of stands like a soldier, barely moving. But here, his hand is around Mary's hand, and their hand equally supports the child who is clinging to them. And the little bags under their eyes, under Mary's eyes and Joseph's eyes, and Jesus' eyes, you can tell they are exhausted. They're at the end of their rope, and yet there is unbelievable intimacy and joy in this statue. You see the parents and they are still overwhelmed with joy with their child.

Now, the artist who created this statue, and the beautiful nuns who put it up at Henry Ford Providence Hospital, they knew what they were doing, didn't they? They weren't depicting just a nativity as it's often seen. They're depicting an image of the holy family, of the intimacy of that little family unit as it went through all of the disturbing journey that that family went through. Being refugees to Egypt and back, struggling with all of the contentions around them, trying to understand what God was calling them into being, trying to figure out who this kid was.

This statue was placed at a hospital where so many people were running into their own challenges on a biological level. Where there were births and deaths on a biological level. And it conveys to everybody who steps into that space that they were more than the biology that drove them to that hospital, whether as helpers or those needing care. They were there at a moment of natality. They were there at a moment of birth. When the caregivers provide space for those sick families to have support and to care for those children and to care for those people that come there, they are creating space for nativity, if you see what I'm saying. And when the people are going through all of their challenges as they are patients, and wading through all of that difficulty, they are going through a time of nativity. God is with them. God loves them, and in the midst of that birth, they are being born into relationship with God.

That is the nativity I saw. And it gives me strength. And that is the nativity that we are invited to ask ourselves about this Christmas season. Reflect on your life. In the midst of all the beautiful things around you today, reflect on your world. In the midst of all the things that pull you back and forth today, reflect on where you are with God tonight because your opportunity to renew that relationship with God, that new birth, that new being, that is what we celebrate tonight. In the words of Phillip Brooks in his beautiful hymn, O Little Town of Bethlehem:

O little Child of Bethlehem,
descend to us, we pray;
cast out our sin and enter in;
be born in us today.

Amen.