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**Christmas Eve**

**December 24, 2015**

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## **“Is God a Monster?”**

*(Luke 2:7)*

Rev. David K. Groth

*“And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn” (Luke 2:7).*

**COLLECT:** O God, You make us glad with the yearly remembrance of the birth of Your only-begotten Son, Jesus Christ, Grant that as we joyfully receive Him as our Redeemer, we may with sure confidence behold Him when He comes to be our Judge; through the same Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

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Is God a monster? It's kind of a startling question on Christmas Eve, even disappointing, but stay with me. We'll get to back to the manger in a minute.

Last month I was listening to Wisconsin Public Radio. Kathleen Dunn was interviewing a Paul Ehrlich, a Stanford professor who was supposed to be talking about disappearing species, but somehow got off topic just long enough to take a couple of shots at the Christian faith. He called our God "a non-existent, supernatural monster". Ehrlich has been on a roll. Last month he called Christian education a form of child abuse. He gets a lot of air-time on public radio.

*Is* God a monster? A friend of mine in college certainly thought so. I'll never forget: shortly after a major earth quake in Mexico City he said, "I refuse to believe in a God that would allow such a thing to happen." What would trigger a statement like that in you? Everybody has a trigger. What's yours? "I refuse to believe in a God who . . . watched as that drunk driver drifted across the center line into my daughter's lane?" Or, "I refuse to believe in a God who allows the wicked to get rich while I struggle to pay the electric bill? I refuse to believe in a God who demands moral perfection

and doesn't support my lifestyle? I refuse to believe in a God so cruel and vindictive that there would be such a place called hell."

In light of recent terrorist attacks some are even asking "Is it time to eradicate religion?" After all, the hands that pulled the triggers of the assault rifles belonged to men and women whose hearts burned with the fires of religious zeal. It would seem religion breeds violence, therefore the sooner we eradicate religion, or at least quarantine it, the better off we will be. It's not a new sentiment.

Back in 1971 John Lennon wrote,

"Imagine there's no heaven,  
No hell below us . . . *And no religion too*  
Imagine all the people  
Living life in peace . . ."

Is God a monster? A growing number of people would say yes and would also call him a bully, a murderer, an ethnic cleanser, an oppressor, and a control freak.

Now, back to the manger: Luke 2:7, "And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn."

When you look into the manger, what do you see? Do you see a bully? Do you see an ethnic cleanser, a murderer, an oppressor? When you look into the manger do you see a control freak? Is that a monster in the manger?

What do you see when you look into the manger? I see a God who is strong enough to be a baby. I see a God who could have done the power job on us and wiped us out with righteous anger, we

puny ones who like to set ourselves up in judgment over God. But he doesn't do that. Instead, God chooses to break into our lives not as a monster, but as an infant, with audacious vulnerability. He chooses to need us. He needs shelter, his mother's milk, human love. He needs community. And miracle of miracles, in taking on human flesh and coming to us so vulnerably, we are the ones who are transformed.

You know Highway A going out of the west side of town sure feels like a highway to me, and yet it's posted at 25 miles per hour. More than once I've caught myself accidentally going significantly faster. But 25 is the law. And if you truly go 25 (not 30, not 32) it feels like your crawling. To me, the law feels wrong. I might obey it, but it's not because I like it. It's fear that drives my obedience, fear of getting ticket, fear of higher insurance costs. The point is, the brute force of the law has not warmed my heart. I might obey it, but I don't love it.

That's not the kind of relationship Jesus wants to have with us, one based on force and fear. He can do irresistible power on us as the world's policeman, but that's not who he wants to be with us. Perhaps that's why Jesus came as an infant. After all, what is there to fear about a new-born infant? An infant can't harm you. An infant can't use his words to tear you down. An infant can't crush your limbs. (It's the other way around, right?) People don't typically flee in holy terror from an infant. Rather infants draw us in, don't they?

My wife can spot an infant a mile away. She tries so hard not to come on too strong, but can hardly resist getting closer to admire the details of God's creative work, the eyelashes, the little fingernails, the perfect skin. And, if the adult seems okay and not freaked out, my wife might reach out and touch the toes. Any God who comes to us as a baby intends to draw us in and not make us run in fear.

That's no monster in the manger. That's a God who chooses humility and weakness to save us. That's a God who holds all the oceans of the world in one hand, but maybe a few stems of straw in the other. His Word is "sharper than any double edged sword" the Bible says, but at Bethlehem, the Word incarnate, his mouth and lips cannot yet even wrap themselves around the word "mom". He shouted the distant galaxies into existence, but his crying in the manger couldn't have been heard much more than a house or two away. He "perceives our thoughts from afar" the psalmist says, but at Bethlehem he looks curiously at the big, brown cow, who, I suspect looks curiously right back at the one who is lying in his feed trough. He is a God who is at the front edge of the expanding universe, many, many light years away, but he's also here with us tonight, for he promised, "Wherever two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them." Omnipotent is too small a word to describe his power, but so is vulnerable to describe his weakness.

I hope you will pause tonight and consider what it means that God did not decide to swoop in

with all power and might to force us into something; nor did God simply decide to walk away from this fallen, messy world, leaving us to stew in our own sin and filth and death. Consider what it means that he came in weakness. For the same weakness we see in the manger we will see on the cross. Clearly, he's not here to do the power job on us sinners. He's here to save sinners, even as his name "Jesus" declares.

So the words we keep hearing from the angels this night are, "Do not be afraid." To Zechariah, to Mary, to Joseph, to the shepherds, and ultimately to us: Do not be afraid. God is not out to get you. He loves you, and has come to die for you, to forgive you, and to give you eternal life.

So with the shepherds let's hurry off to Bethlehem once again, and find the one wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger. Look at his newborn face, the fine details of God's marvelous creation: eye lashes, fingernails, the perfect skin, and be amazed all over again that this is God's love made flesh for you and your salvation. It's a love that will not force its way into your heart. It's a love that breaks the cycle of revenge and refuses to retaliate. It's a love that draws us in, and even embraces enemies. It's a love that has taken on your sin as his own, and your death. It's a love that died for you on the cross, but also rose again for you. It's a love that holds you in the palm of his hand and never let you go.

Is God a monster? Any God who comes to us as a baby is a God who intends us no harm. No harm. Only life. Amen.



