

## What Child is This?

A sermon preached by the Rev. Canon Joanna C. Leiserson at Christ Church Cathedral, Cincinnati, Ohio, on Sunday, December 26, 2010.

*Isaiah 61:10-62:3; Psalm 147:13-21; Galatians 3:23-25; 4:4-7; John 1:1-18*

In the compressed calendar that the Church uses to mark the life of Jesus Christ, we cover the events of his 33-year earthly lifespan from his birth to his death and resurrection, in around four months. With that timeline in mind, I would say that as of this morning, Jesus is around three months old now.

The wild joy of having a baby is now being mixed with other experiences. Mary is settling down with her baby and probably dealing with the usual post-partum issues that hit every mother: the aches and pains that come from adjusting from the birth of a baby, extreme sleep deprivation from waking up every three hours to feed the baby, post-partum blues, and so on. Maybe, if she were part of a good Chinese family, her parents would have made her a big supply of the soup that we call “New Mother’s Best Friend,” to take some of the stress off the first days of new motherhood. The soup consists of a little meat, a little vegetable, a little broth, and a whole cup of gin. Per serving.

We assume that after the Roman census is over, Mary and Joseph get to move to a different part of town than the barn that they were shuttled to when they first arrived in Bethlehem. Most days, Jesus strikes his mother and father as an ordinary baby, except for things like visiting shepherds and singing angels and worshiping dignitaries from afar. He sleeps, gets hungry, cries, smiles and coos, learns how to sit and crawl and walk, just like any other little baby. But after the visit from the shepherds, Luke says that Mary pondered all the strange signs in her heart, probably during one of the groggy midnight feedings. But Joseph may have been able to ponder more freely—who is this baby? Why are all these things happening around him? How exactly is he Emmanuel, God With Us? How much is Jesus “with” God, and how much is Jesus—God?

At this point, the Holy Family has not yet gone home, to Nazareth. First, they will find out that they need to pack up their things in the dead of night and flee to Egypt—a kind of reverse Passover, a journey not seeking freedom but escaping death, not in triumph but in fear. Judea is King Herod’s country. In a horrendous trampling of human rights, Herod will turn his murderous jealousy on the children of Bethlehem, and Joseph, Mary and Jesus will become refugees, immigrants into Egypt, a new homeless family.

But right now, we still experience the wonder and joy of this newborn baby who is to be called Emmanuel—God with us—and Savior of the world. We still sing “What child is this, who, laid to rest, on Mary’s lap is sleeping?” We still have ten more days to celebrate the birth of the baby Jesus.

It is in the middle of this celebration, of the birth of the little baby Jesus, that the Church reminds us of the fuller picture. Just so we don't get too caught up in the celebration of Jesus as human—God *with* us, John the evangelist hits us with “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” It almost feels as if we're being told to put aside Jesus the human, and turn toward Jesus the divine—already. As we celebrate Jesus' birth, do not forget, John tells us, the Church tells us, Jesus is fully human, but not only human. Jesus is fully divine, but not only divine.

“You shall be called by a new name,” says Isaiah, “that the mouth of the Lord will give.” Prophets speak their words in the midst of brokenness. Isaiah said these words of promise right from the depth of the despair of exile. And because Isaiah is a fierce prophet, he puts his promise into poetry, because putting words into poetry is like shouting out your defiant hope to the world. In poetry, the prophet tells a world of prose that the vision of hope and promise that he sees is happening right here, and right now.

So it is with John, who puts the first words of his Gospel into poetry. He too talks about a “new name,” in his own way: “In the beginning was the Word.” In fact, for John, with the coming of Jesus, everything is new, and everything will have a new name. How does John put the newness into words? In John, Jesus is the Word made flesh; he is Glory in the flesh, he is the Light of the World, the Bread of Life, the resurrection and the life. As the years go by and Jesus of history becomes the Christ of faith, there will come other names for the one who, in our calendar, was just born yesterday as a baby in a manger: we will call him the Messiah, the great high priest, the Savior of the world, the Redeemer of the world, the Son of God.

We too have a new name—so says Isaiah, Paul in Galatians, John. We are to be called “children of God.” No longer are we orphans in a broken world, but children of God. Jesus live true to his name and his calling. Let us also live true to ours.

So today and in the next ten days of Christmas, as we continue to celebrate the birth of a baby, we are told to remember what Mary and Joseph probably did not know yet about their little baby: “He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of the world.” Come, let us adore **him**.