

# Known But Not Yet Met

Christmas 2020

Sermon preached by Zac Koons for St. Mark's, Austin

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In my own household it has been difficult to separate our Advent of spiritual preparation for the coming of the baby Jesus from our emotional and practical preparation for the coming of our own baby, due to arrive, well, any minute now. I can't imagine, for example, telling Anna that we need to pack our things and travel by donkey to Waco—Waco being as far from Austin as Bethlehem is from Nazareth.

And this is not the only way in which I find myself identifying with and feeling sympathy for Joseph these days. Can you imagine the logistical nightmare of frantically making the arrangements for a “barn birth?” The rearranging of equipment required? The rearranging of livestock?! The distressing lack of clean surfaces? I shudder to think of what was used to cut the umbilical cord. I also wonder to myself: Was Joseph a proponent of the Bradley method? Was he required to play midwife?! Did he sit by Mary's side throughout, breathing intentionally according to Mary's rhythm but only one beat slower to subtly encourage and guide her through labor? Or was it all too overwhelming such that he found himself taking a few solo laps around Bethlehem? Were cigars distributed to the shepherds? I am starting to sweat.

In the course of our practical preparation—from midwife appointments, zoom birthing classes, etc.—I have noticed the repetition of a particular phrase which, when held against this most holy day in our church calendar, seems to have a certain theological resonance. It is a phrase, I have found, that is used most often as a source of motivation. Used most often following words like, *I know you're uncomfortable but . . . Yes, it will be painful but . . .* The phrase I'm talking about is this: “Soon you get to meet your baby.” It sounds so ordinary, obvious even, but the more I have reflected on it, the more bizarre and also the more beautiful it has become. Let me explain, though to do so I need to switch from the perspective of Joseph to that of Mary.

What must it be like to “meet” someone who you, in some sense, already know? Someone, in fact, who you have been in intimate contact with for the better part of a year already. Someone who for that time has not left your company for even an instant. Someone who is closer to you—and more constantly so—than anyone has ever been before actually. Someone for whom you make daily sacrifices; someone with whom you commune through a mysterious exchange of cells; someone who takes calcium from your bones so they can grow while giving you fetal cells in return to help your body heal. Someone whose daily rhythms of waking and sleeping and kicking and stretching you are already acquainted with. Someone you, perhaps, already talk to or sing to; someone with a heartbeat you can feel and ears that can hear and hands and feet that can push you in ways that will make you spontaneously yelp even though you are in the middle of a serious work-related zoom meeting—and all the while, this same someone is one whom you have yet to meet, someone whose face you have yet to behold. Someone who remains mostly a mystery to you. Someone whose character, whose personality has yet to emerge; someone whose interests, imperfections, and eye color you can still only guess. You know them, but you haven't met them. How beautifully bizarre.

Here's the thing: This beautiful bizarreness—this intimate miracle—that all pregnant women from my wife in Austin to Mary in Bethlehem to Eve out of Eden share in common with one another is analogous to what is happening on a cosmic level for the whole world in the birth of Jesus. What I mean is this: Think of the birth of Jesus as the moment that the world finally gets to meet God. It is when Mary, Joseph and all of Israel get to see God face to face. But this does not mean that they didn't already know God before this moment. They did. And in all kinds of intimate ways.

God's relationship with humanity began in a moment of climactic creation, where new life came forth from nothing. Thereafter God and God's people were present to one another through other embodied modes of

mysterious communion. Through the offering of sacrifice and exchanging of gifts. The people of Israel spoke to God through prayer, even song, for generations. And God, through a variety of modes and mediums, subtly but certainly according to observable patterns, communicated in return. God was known to Israel in a burning bush, in a still small voice in the wilderness, through the signs and wonders of Moses and Elijah, in words spoken through the prophets, in judgment brought against oppressors, in the deliverance slaves to freedom, through promises kept to those in exile, and surprisingly often in children conceived in what appeared to be impossible circumstances.

But still, through this whole time, always to some degree God's character remained a mystery. For a moment there Abraham thought this God was one of those gods that required child sacrifice. Remember that? Throughout the Old Testament there seems to be confusion about God's stance towards violence—on one page God appears to be saying “thou shalt not kill” and then on another “go kill all the Amalekites.” God presence is elusive, sometimes literally cloudy—remember the pillar of cloud by day and fire by night? Eventually Israel had the Temple, but even then only the high priest could enter the Holy of Holies and even him only once a year. And then eventually, of course, the Temple—the principal signifier of God's presence—is destroyed and the people of Israel are exiled and that throws into question what little they thought they *did* know about this God up to that point. Is God still real? Are we still God's chosen people? Does God still love us? Will God rescue us from even this?

The birth of Jesus is what Israel has been waiting for. The motivation that brought them through generations of struggle. It is what the whole world—what all of history—has been waiting for. Here everything that was cloudy is now made clear. Everything elusive is now made material, enfleshed. Jesus shows us fully and finally who God really is. What God is really like. The way we get to see and know God now makes everything that came before seem like in-utero kicks. History was pregnant with the Son of God. The Old Testament was the longest 9 months the world has ever known, filled with joyous anticipation but still in some sense incomplete. Now he is here. Now the Son of God is lying in the manger and meeting us face to face.

And so the question for us today is this: What do we see? What difference does this meeting make?

Of course, you don't see everything at once. As Jesus grows, our picture of God gets filled out more and more. We come to see that of all the people in the universe, he prefers to spend most of his time with the poor. We find that he calls all his followers to live lives of disciplined holiness, yet he offers forgiveness seventy times seven. We see that he heals the broken; that he loved not just his neighbors but his enemies; that he would rather die than defend himself with violence; we see that God loves us with a radical, selfless, and sacrificial kind of love, and much else besides.

But all of that comes later. I want to focus on Christmas. What do we see about God in this barn in Bethlehem? We see one thing above all else: vulnerability. I want to say two things about the vulnerability we see in the manger.

The first thing we see is the vulnerability of God. The God who is above all things, who is all-powerful and all-knowing has put himself below all things; has made himself fragile and dependent—vulnerable to us. God has made himself so that you can hold him in two hands, as a precious gift to be cherished, something you give your whole life to, someone who you shape your whole life around, someone who transforms your heart and your habits from the inside out. God offers life and salvation by offering himself as a free gift to you; a gift we're reminded of week after week in communion when God says to us “This is my body, broken for you” and we reach out to hold that life in our two hands.

But God's vulnerability means the opposite is also possible. That his life, his gift of salvation, is also something we can ignore, something we can reject and cast aside—even worse, it is something we can accuse, arrest, and crucify. One writer summed up it up by saying, “The Savior of the world was born with a skull you could crush in your hand” (Beuchner).

The second thing we see is the vulnerability of humanity. Looking down in the manger at a Jesus who is not only fully divine but also fully human, we see our own vulnerability reflected back to us. We see our own fragility, our own dependence.

We tend to associate vulnerability with weakness, something to be avoided at all costs; something that is a consequence of sin and brokenness. But this is not true. Or, it is only partly true. It is true that our vulnerability to death and decay is a consequence of sin; it is not inherent to how God made us, and it will not last forever. Death is the last enemy to be defeated. But, death remains, for now, unavoidable. It remains a vulnerability we all share in common. And secondly, vulnerability in the sense of our dependence on others is actually not a weakness at all. It *is* an essential part of our created nature; it is an inherently good, intentionally designed aspect of creatureliness. God saw that it was not good for us to be alone before the serpent was part of the story. And God shaped salvation so it would be all about embodied, mutual relationship—both with God and with others. God made us so that the more one tries to be independent, the more one insulates themselves from others, the further away from God, and the further away from true joy, one gets. Humans come into the world needing to be cared for, needing to be loved, and that never stops. More care and more love only ever make us more fully alive.

The important point that ties these two sides of vulnerability together is this: Vulnerability is the location where humanity meets divinity. Vulnerability is where we meet God and where God meets us. That is what we see looking down at Jesus in the manger. God has taken on human form, himself vulnerable to death. Jesus is fully God and yet utterly dependent on others to survive and flourish. And precisely that vulnerability is a means of God's revelation to us. A vehicle through which God meets us. Vulnerability is where humanity and divinity meet.

This year has brought us face to face with vulnerability. More than we would have ever imagined. It has brought tragedy and grief. Confusion and loneliness. Anxiety and anguish. And in the face of it, I believe we have a choice to make: One option is to wait it out. To keep our head down, grit our teeth, and get through it. Hopefully before too much longer things will be back to normal and we can keep our fingers crossed that the damage done to ourselves or our loved ones will be minimal. In the meantime, we must stay strong. That's one option.

The other option is the Christmas option, which is to look at our vulnerability head on, face-to-face, and to hold it, to lean toward it. To stop pretending like everything is ok. To stop pretending like "normal" was all that great to begin with. To stop living according to the assumption that I am or was ever in complete control of my life in the first place. To be rid of the notion that with enough money, time, or energy I could fix any problem that came my way. To admit to ourselves that we actually do need help. And to recognize that vulnerability not as a weakness but as a strength. Even more, to expect that in turning towards our vulnerability, that that is precisely the location where we can expect God to meet us. Our vulnerability is not something to be avoided at all costs; it is an invitation to come closer to God than ever before. To be more alive and more fully human than ever before. That's the Christmas option.

This virus has done terrible damage to us. We wish it never would have happened. But now that it has, is it possible that it has also given us the gift of forever removing from us the illusion that we are invincible? That we can successfully live invulnerable and independent lives? Or will we go right back to living within the delusion of self-sufficiency once the vaccine comes. Time will tell. But you don't have to wait. You can decide right now.

Are you tired of pretending? Is your heart crying out for help? For relationship? For meaning? It turns out that's actually a good thing. It's actually a strength not a weakness. It's actually what you were created for. That's what Christmas is all about. God has made himself vulnerable to us. The question is will we make ourselves vulnerable to God in return. And here's a secret to keep in mind: God already knows everything about you. Even if you have never met, even if it has been years or decades since you last spoke, God was the one who formed you in your mother's womb in the first place. You are not a mystery to God. God knows your every kick and scream. Your

interests, imperfections, and eye color. And God is waiting, waiting with eager and joyous anticipation, to meet you face to face.

Amen.