

Love Comes Crashing In

The Rev. Lex Breckinridge
St. Thomas Episcopal Church
Christmas Eve, December 24, 2009

Twenty-nine years, three months and seventeen days ago, my life changed forever. That was the day that Alexander Breckinridge V, four days old with beautiful pink cheeks and a thatch of blond hair, came home from the hospital.

Now I really didn't know what to expect. I had never spent much time around babies, much less a baby I'd had a part in creating, so I wasn't really prepared for—how *noisy* babies are. And I *really* wasn't prepared for how a baby's digestive system works—or doesn't work.

I got the hang of it pretty quick because Zonnie sure wasn't going to be the only one in our house changing dirty diapers—and those were the days before disposable diapers—I know a lot of you parents are old enough to remember what a treat *that* was. Now it didn't take me too many diaper changes—or too many dirty dunks—to know that this was a real live human being.

And then Alexander turned up with colic. These symptoms never seemed to manifest themselves at, say, three in the afternoon—like when I was at work. No, it was more like three in the morning when the little guy's face would turn red and he'd begin to yell like I was poking him with a sharp stick—until finally the only thing to stop the tears and the screaming was to put him in our little two-door Subaru and drive him around through the empty streets of Uptown New Orleans. Frustrating for him, and frustrating for his dad and mom. I'll tell you, the six weeks he had colic seemed like about six years.

Looking back on that time, I realize that Alexander's arrival in my life marked the time I began to grow up. Until then, I had been pretty self-absorbed, busy thinking about my career and getting ahead in the world. I was kind of sleepwalking through life. But now, with the arrival of this insistent, demanding, unavoidable other, this unmistakably human incarnation of love between wife and husband, I had to shift my focus. Love had come crashing into my world in a way that I couldn't ignore.

So, too, it is on this night. Love comes crashing into this world in a way we can't ignore. Our long Advent vigil—our time of attentiveness and self-reflection, our time of waiting and longing for something beyond us, our longing for something larger than our own small and selfish needs ... all this is fulfilled in the shattering cry of a newborn baby who drops into our sleepwalk through life and turns our lives upside down.

Yeah, but what do we *do* with it? I can tell you, when Alexander first came home from the hospital, I was ten left thumbs. I realize in hindsight that I was scared to death. I didn't know what to do with this new thing in my life. It took me time to learn how to be a dad. It took me time to let go of my self-consciousness, to let go of my need to do it right, to let go of my need to be perfect. It took me time, that is to say, to know deep in my bones that along with love had come grace.

Grace is something you can never just go out and pick up. There's no way to earn it or deserve it or wish it into being, any more than we can earn or deserve the kiss of a fresh breeze on the cheek. The ducks lifting into the air out of the pond in Medina Park across from our front door are grace. Rainier on a clear day is grace. Loving and being loved are grace.

In his book *The Alphabet of Grace*, Frederick Buechner says:

Here is your life. You might never have been, but you are here because the party wouldn't be complete without you. Here is the world. Beautiful and terrible things will happen. Don't be afraid. I am with you. Nothing can ever separate us. It is for you I created the universe. I love you.

That's the way the birth of my son seemed to work. I hadn't done anything to deserve it, and I sure hadn't earned it. It had, as it were, dropped straight out of heaven, and I just had to open my arms wide enough to catch it.

That's what we hear tonight in the letter to Titus: "For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all." Divine grace drops into our lives as a human baby, here for all of us, everywhere, for all time. All we have to do is open our arms wide enough to catch it. And when we do that, the letter to Titus reminds us, we'll want to give up everything that doesn't live up to the way Jesus lived his own life. Being passionate for these "good deeds" that are part of our divine purpose, we'll find the fullness of life in Christ right here and right now. It's the beginning of our experience of salvation.

One of the most poignant and grace-filled moments of my life as a dad came on the morning we dropped Alexander off at college for the first time. He kissed his mother goodbye, and then he kissed me goodbye, and as he turned and walked away from us with eagerness and excitement and expectation towards his dormitory, out of our lives and into his own, out of childhood and into adulthood, I found tears inexplicably streaming down my face. And a thought I had, as I watched that beautiful baby, now an accomplished young man, walk away from me, was this: "Am I living my life in such a way that this boy can be proud of me?"

It's the only response that seemed right and good—and still does today—to the grace that came down from heaven and dropped into my life 29 years, three months and 17 days ago. Is the life I'm living worthy of the love that God has given me in Christ Jesus? Is the life I'm living worthy of the grace that God has given me in the love of my children and the love of my wife? Is the life I'm living worthy of the grace the God has given me in the love of you, my sisters and brothers, fellow pilgrims on the journey in faith?

And the answer is that sometimes it is, and sometimes it isn't. And to thank God for the grace appearing in the world, freely given and bringing salvation to all, even to ones as broken as you and me.

On this night, Love has come crashing into the world, and you can't ignore it. On this night, we live in the Eternal Now of God coming among us. Emmanuel—God is with us—made from the same stuff we are and the same stuff as God. On this night, the insistent,

demanding, determined baby reaches out between Heaven and Earth and won't let go of any of us.

So, on this night, let us pray:

Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the Most High, Prince of Peace, be born again into our world. Wherever there is war in this world, wherever there is pain, wherever there is loneliness, wherever there is no hope, come, thou long-expected one, with healing in your wings.

Holy Child, whom the shepherds and the kings and the dumb beasts adored, be born again. Wherever there is boredom, wherever there is fear of failure, wherever there is temptation too strong to resist, wherever there is bitterness of heart, come, blessed one, with healing in your wings.

Savior, be born in each of us who raises his face to your face, not knowing fully who he is or who you are, knowing only that your love is beyond his knowing and that no other has the power to make him whole. Come, Lord Jesus, to each who longs for you even though he has forgotten your name. Come quickly. Amen.

- Frederick Buechner, *The Hungering Dark*