Sunday, December 17, 1989
**A BABY AND MORE**
Matthew 11:2-11

"Are you he who is to come, or shall we look for another?" That was the question on the mind of John the Baptist as he sat in prison, wondering if he had made a mistake about Jesus. He had been put in prison because, in his preaching, he had criticized some of the government officials. There, he had a lot of time to think, and he kept getting reports about this Jesus whom he had baptized. He had heard that large crowds were following Jesus, but Jesus wasn't fulfilling John's expectations of what he thought the Messiah would be.

He kept hearing about Jesus healing people of their diseases, forgiving sinners, eating with outcasts, and preaching good news to the poor. He even heard that Jesus had eaten in the home of a tax collector and that at a wedding, he had turned water into wine. By then, he was called a wine-bibber and a glutton.

As John the Baptist languished in prison, he couldn't help but be puzzled. "Did I make a mistake? Is this Jesus the promised Messiah of God?"

So John sent some of his followers to investigate for him. They came to Jesus and asked, "Are you he who is to come, or shall we look for another?" Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them. You and John will have to decide for yourselves on the basis of what is happening."

John the Baptist had foretold the coming of the Messiah in somewhat different terms. He pictured the Savior as primarily a judge who would be stern and demanding. He threatened his audiences with fire and brimstone. In addition, John had lived an entirely different kind of life than Jesus. He had taken a vow of poverty and lived in the desert. He never attended wedding celebrations or parties. He assumed the Messiah would follow his pattern.

Like us, John the Baptist was discovering that there is often a wide difference between our idea of something and the thing itself. Perhaps you've had the experience of preparing for someone you were expecting, and then when that person arrives and you get to know him or her, you are quite surprised and maybe even disappointed because the individual did not fit your idea or preconception of what he or she would be.

When John's disciples reported back to him with the answer that Jesus gave them, the gospel stories do not tell us what his response was. But from later history, we can assume that John changed his assumptions and accepted Jesus as the Messiah, even though he didn't fit his original idea.

But how about us? Most of us have some kind of idea in mind as to the kind of person Jesus was, and we have some concept of what God is. Yet we too, like John the Baptist, can always expect to be surprised because we never know all there is to know about God or Jesus.

J. B. Phillips, in his remarkable little book Your God Is Too Small, shows how frequently our ideas of God are inadequate, limited, and parochial, so that if we experience God in a way different from our ideas, we may miss God altogether because we are unprepared to

encounter God in a form that we had not expected. The same is true of Jesus. We like to keep him pictured in our mind as we like him best.

I suspect that one reason our culture loves Christmas so much is because almost everybody loves a baby. At Christmas, we emphasize Jesus as a baby, and that is part of its inexhaustible pull on the minds and hearts of humanity. But it can also be a liability. A great many people become so entranced with the beautiful story of a baby in a manger that they miss the chief point of the story. After all, a baby is so harmless, so helpless, so dependent, so vulnerable. We can become charmed with the story of a baby and grow quite sentimental about it. It does not require that we do very much about it. The baby in the manger does not demand much in our way of thinking and being.

Some people, therefore, keep Jesus as a baby in a manger. He's quite safe there. Christmas is frequently called the "Birthday of Jesus." Most birthday parties, however, do not require the one being honored to revert to being a baby. I suspect that at your birthday parties, you do not each year get back into the crib and celebrate. Most of us don't even get out our baby pictures.

But each year at Christmas, it's easier to lapse into total infatuation with the "baby." I'm not quite sure how to respond to that baby. What is a 2,000-year-old baby like? Birthday cards are not readily available for people over 100.

The New Testament tells us nothing about the life of Jesus from the time shortly after his birth until he reached the age of 12, and then there is only one brief incident recorded about him at that age. Perhaps those who remembered Jesus did not consider this part of his life to be crucial for God's revelation to the world. Perhaps they wanted to keep our minds open to the fuller truth of Jesus as an adult. The Gospel of Mark mentions absolutely nothing about his early life and doesn't even worry about his birth. The Apostle Paul never talked about Jesus as a baby or a young man.

But our way is easier for our consciences. A baby is so easy to worship; so thorough in desensitizing our consciences to anguish, suffering, and injustice. Ethics do not proceed from the mouth of a baby. A baby doesn't ask us to take up our cross and follow him. When the stockings are hung by the chimney with care, we don't often remember that the baby grew up to be hanged on a cross. Babies are so innocent and helpless. They haven't yet learned to accept or reject our definitions of success or failure.

So like John the Baptist in prison, we can make the mistake of thinking of Jesus only in terms of what we want him to be. Our temptation at Christmas is to keep him as a baby. We have little trouble worshipping the baby Jesus, but it's more difficult to stand at the foot of the cross.

What I am saying here is not to deny the fact that God entered our world as a newborn baby. Remember, Jesus was a baby like all the rest of us, but also remember that he grew up. It was his whole life, including his death and resurrection, that continues to call into question our values.

Jesus was no sentimentalist; he was a complete realist. He said that everything opposed to love and harmony in God's world is doomed. Many of the things we worship and count on are false.

We say, "Blessed are those who have power." Jesus said, "Blessed are the meek; blessed are the pure in heart; blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness; blessed are the

poor in spirit; blessed are those who mourn; blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake."

"Do not be anxious about your life, what you shall eat, or what you shall drink, nor about your body, what you shall put on. Is not life more than food and the body more than clothing? Seek first God's Kingdom and God's righteousness. Love your enemies, bless those who persecute you."

I once knew a man who had a well-to-do aunt who was quite fond of him when he was a baby and a little boy. Since she lived a long distance from him, she had seen him only twice in the past 15 years. But she continued to send him a birthday card and present each year, although the gifts were suitable for a child of six to ten years old. She could never quite accept the fact that the child had become an adult.

Each year, this young man would pass the gift to some needy youngster who could use it. The case is not difficult to understand. In growing up, this young man had acquired some values that were quite the opposite of those of his aunt. He had become part of a group ministry that lived and worked in the slums of a large city, and he carried on his ministry there. In doing so, he and others came to challenge some of the power holders and landlords. His aunt could never understand what happened to that sweet little baby boy she loved so much. Why did he have to grow up and change? He seemed so different as a child.

We need to remember each year at Christmas that this baby Jesus became an adult and that the power-holders of his time rightly saw him as a threat to their way of doing things, and so they crucified him.

In a book by Harry Emerson Fosdick entitled Dear Mr. Brown, Fosdick tells of a father's frustrating attempt to explain the nature of God to his young daughter, who was confused by the stories of war and destruction in parts of the Old Testament. The father read from the later prophets: "What does God require of you, but to do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?"

Then he read to his daughter from the New Testament: "Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God, and those who love are born of God and know God." After a short pause, the little girl said to him, "Daddy, God grew better as God got older, don't you think?" That's one way of putting it. Another way is to say that God grows better as we come into a more mature knowledge of God.

Christmas is a beautiful time, and it's quite appropriate to remember and celebrate the fact that God entered this world in a new way in the person of Jesus and that this Jesus was born in the same way that all of us enter this world. But then our faith needs to grow and expand as this same Jesus becomes an adult and is always more than our expectations or ideas. This Jesus cannot be kept in the manger, in any kind of box, or in any creed or doctrine.

It's fitting to worship the baby in the manger, for God is there in all innocence and vulnerability — and God is also in Jesus as an adult. The manger, like the cross, is a perfect symbol of powerlessness. Someone once said, "We want God to be strong so we can be weak. But God wants to be weak so that we can be strong."

The Christmas story is a story about a baby — and more. It's the story of God in our world in every time and place.

Last year, a little paperback book was sent to me with the title Sometimes God Has a Kid's Face. The book is about Covenant House in New York City, where a Catholic priest and many volunteers offer shelter to young people who have run away from home and finally have nowhere else to go. The book is filled with true stories of these young people who frequently have been exploited by adults.

Sometimes God does have a kid's face, even a baby's face, and also God has a worn-down, wrinkled adult face.

Do you want to meet the Christ this Christmas? You will find him in the person of homeless infants and children, and also adults. You will find him in prison and in hospitals — you will find him in you as you reach out to others.

According to an ancient myth, at Creation's start, Christ and Satan were each requested to submit to God a plan for dealing with the infant human race that already was showing signs of delinquency. Satan's plan was simple (the kind that Secretaries of State and Defense might come up with): God has armies of angels at his command; why not assign an angel with punitive power to each human being? That should keep the race in line.

In other words, Satan was the first "hard-liner," urging God to use force. Isn't that what we would like God to do? When things go badly for us personally — or nationally — don't we expect God, rather than ourselves, to straighten out the mess?

In contrast to Satan's, Christ's plan was extraordinarily imaginative and implied a regard for humanity so high that Satan must have mocked it. "Let them have free will and go their own way," Christ proposed to God, "only let me live and die as one of them, both as an example of how to live and to show them how much you care for them. The only answer to their delinquency is for them to realize that there is more mercy in you than sin in them."

At Christmas, it becomes clear which plan God chose to implement. But if John the Baptist, confined to his cell, had a hard time understanding and accepting Christ's plan, so it may also be difficult for us. But it is the Good News. Amen.