



"The Best Christmas Present Ever"

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Eden United Church of Christ
Hayward, California*

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Luke 2:1-12 (NRSV)

We have a new baby in our family. My sister's oldest daughter, Susie, and her husband, Nate, welcomed their first child into the world this past Monday at 6:38 p.m. Central time. The baby's name is Naaman David Niehus.

Naaman is not only Susie and Nate's first child, he is my sister and brother-in-law's first grandchild, and our mother's first great-grandchild. Great-grandma Judy's double bonus this year is that Naaman was born on her 69th birthday! And what a birthday present—what a Christmas present—he is!

I have a few pictures for "Show & Tell" if you're interested. See Stephanie or me in Oliver Hall. One of my favorites was taken of Naaman just before his parents brought him home from the hospital on Wednesday. I call it the "stocking stuffer" picture. It's a picture of Naaman in a red and black onesie and matching hat that his mom made for him. He's tucked inside of a giant Christmas stocking, and lying in the middle of his mother's hospital bed. The caption on the stocking says, "Happy Holidays." Susie posted this picture on her Facebook wall a couple of days ago and wrote the caption, "Best Christmas present ever!"

For those who are into baby statistics, Naaman weighed 7 lbs. 11 ounces, and was 20.5 inches long at birth. Susie told me on the phone last night that the nurses at the hospital knick named him "Quick Trip." (Quick Trip is Oklahoma's answer to small neighborhood grocery stores that are open 7 to 11.)

Naaman's birth announcement came in the form of a text message that Chrisie, my other niece, sent from her cell phone on Monday night saying: "He's here!"

Within 24 hours, Chrisie was sending photos of the baby to us from her cell phone and posting baby pictures on her Facebook wall.

I got the instant-replay of the birth narrative from my sister, Marlene, who called me each night on her cell phone while she was zipping up and down the highway from the

hospital to Nate and Susie's house, where she was staying while they were in the hospital.

Based on the Facebook pictures and Grandma reports that I've gotten, it's clear that little Naaman has very big hands and feet, and extra-long fingers and toes. My sister says that he looks a lot like his 6'9", 330 pound father. Needless to say, we expect big things from Naaman!

II

Stephanie and I are excited to see Naaman in person. We have our airplane tickets purchased for a trip to Oklahoma and Arkansas during the week after Christmas.

In addition to visiting Naaman and his family, we will celebrate New Year's Eve with family at my sister and brother-in-law's ranch in Arkansas, and then for the grand finale, I'll preside at the marriage of my niece Chrisie and her fiancé, Kaleb, on January 2.

Those who've been around Eden for a couple of years may remember that Susie (Naaman's mom) is my older niece who attended our wedding, and Chrisie is my younger niece, who was here with her fiancé, Kaleb, this past August. Chrisie and Kaleb helped us cook the "Grandma Dinner" for you, and taught some of you to do the "Boot Scoot Boogie" in Oliver Hall at that dinner.

There's no doubt about it—Christmas 2009 is a Christmas to remember for our family! We are excited to be celebrating all of these life-changing experiences with our family, and we do not take for granted anyone's health and wellbeing, or how much technology has changed the way people in the 21st century communicate and celebrate major life transitions, such as the birth of a child.

I have been pondering, for example, just how much technology has changed the way we experience pregnancy and childbirth in the 21st century. The thought occurred to me that pregnancy and childbirth hadn't changed much from the time that Jesus was born until, say, the time that my father was born, about 75 years ago. But my how technology has changed pregnancy and childbirth and how we report these phenomena in the past 75 years!

III

My father was born at home on the farm where I grew up. My Great-aunt Hazel, who was a midwife and nurse, delivered him. She had no formal education beyond high school. Everything she knew about medicine she learned from assisting Doc Camel, an old country doctor, who some said knew more about horses than people, and who made house calls and coached Aunt Hazel through on-the-job training, delivering babies and caring for the sick and the dying all over the county.

Seventy-five years ago there were no infertility treatments, no pregnancy tests, no amniocenteses, no genetics counseling, no ultrasound, no knowledge of the baby's gender before birth, and no knowing whether a pregnancy would result in one baby or multiple births until the day of delivery.

Pregnancy and birthing really did not evolve much between the time of Jesus' birth and the birth of Naaman's great-grandfather. Fast forward now to 2009 and the gestation and birth of any infant this Advent and Christmas season.

Susie, Naaman's mother, called Stephanie and me within the first few weeks of pregnancy to share their big news. The pregnancy was confirmed with an in-home pregnancy test purchased at the local drug store, and reconfirmed at the doctor's office a few days later.

The first pictures we received of the baby arrived months ago by email. In his first photo, "Baby Niehus" looked a lot like a jelly bean, and as Stephanie pointed out, he was about the same size. We learned of Naaman's gender a few months later, and received reports about his approximate weight and size after each of Susie's checkups with the obstetrician. The doctor predicted that December 27 would be his birthday.

Everything went swimmingly with the pregnancy for the first 6 months. Then came the hard part. At her 27-week check-up, Susie was told by her obstetrician that Naaman's heart rate was fluctuating wildly between 50 and 280 beats per minute. (I understand that 120-180 is the normal range for a fetal heartbeat.)

Susie was hospitalized for a couple of days for observation and then referred to a neonatal cardiologist in Tulsa for follow up. The obstetrician and the specialist told Susie and Nate to keep their bags packed, and to be prepared for the baby to be delivered any day. The doctors also cautioned them that if the pregnancy went full term, it would be a miracle.

Our minds raced. We tried not to panic. We hunkered down, said our prayers, and were constantly on the phone trying to keep Susie cheered up, and our blood pressures down.

My sister, who had never missed a day of work in her life, started taking off school and attending Susie's doctor's appointments. Susie had an ultrasound and stress test at every visit. The specialist, who only deals with high-risk pregnancies, said that only one in 10,000 pregnancies presented like Susie's, and that she only saw one baby like Naaman every five years. This news did not ease our minds.

We were grateful, however, that the specialist was level-headed and didn't panic. She opted for a minimalist approach of watching and waiting, and delaying delivery as long as possible so that the baby could continue to develop. Susie was put on bed rest for the remainder of her pregnancy, and told to report for semi-weekly doctor appointments.

About a month ago, things took a considerable turn for the better. Seemingly out of the blue, Naaman's heart rate became normal, and it remained normal throughout the remainder of the pregnancy and the delivery.

When my sister, the biology major, asked the neonatal cardiologist to explain in medical terms how the baby recovered, she simply said, "There isn't a medical explanation. It's a miracle."

IV

I marvel at technology and the advances that science and medicine have given and that many in our society are able to enjoy. I believe that God is still speaking in and through science and scientists, through medicine and doctors, and through every advance that improves our lives and benefits the common good.

In Naaman's case, I'm especially grateful that science and medicine made possible the monitoring of his condition, and the possibility of ameliorating the affects of a mysterious heart condition even if they could not, or did not, cure him of it.

I also believe that no matter how much we learn and how much easier and better our lives become because of scientific and medical advances—around fertility, pregnancy, and childbirth and the technology by which we communicate our baby news—there is and there will always be a truth that transcends time and technology. That truth is this:

God loved the world so much that God came in the form of an infant to forge an irrevocable bond with humanity, so that we might know that we are loved beyond our wildest imaginations, and so that we might learn through the Christ Child how to bring hope, peace, joy, and love into the world—just like he did.

Friends, believe the good news of the gospel, there isn't a scientific explanation for Christmas. It's a miracle. And this miracle is the best Christmas present ever. Receive it, and be glad. Merry Christmas, and amen.