

Birthing

Micah 5:2-5a

Crossroads Christian Church

Luke 2:6-20

December 20, 2015 Advent 4 series

In our home, when our kids were young, we had stories that we would tell them about how they arrived. Our stories might have been a little different than many of you, because all our children were adopted. One embarrassing incident was when we enrolled our youngest daughter, Heather, in Kindergarten. We had celebrated her birthday on November 28, because that's the date we remembered from her birth certificate. But when we showed the birth certificate to the school registrar, she noticed that the actual date of birth was November 27—it had just been filed on the 28th. So she gave us a real hard time about it, that we had missed her birthday four years in a row.

At any rate, we did have a story about how each of our kids came to be ours. Those stories helped us with our sense of family identity, and hopefully, helped our kids know how precious each one was—and is—to us.

Maybe you have family stories that you recall—your memories of how each of your children came into this world—or at least, like us, into your family. Birthing is a major, major process; and you women who have given birth have experienced it that way. Those events have changed your world, your lives, and your families.

The birth that we will be celebrating on Christmas Eve and Christmas, though, and over the twelve days of Christmas, really did change the world. God made an entrance into the world that nobody could have anticipated; that nobody could have predicted. That entrance not only changed the calendar, it not only changed our cultures, but it changed our whole way of looking at the relationship of God and the world. Two weeks ago, we talked about Mary accepting God's invitation to bear the Messiah—the Christ child. Last Sunday, the theme was journeying—we compared our life journeys with the journey that Mary and Joseph made from Nazareth to Bethlehem, and later, the Holy Family's journey to find refuge from Herod's wrath in Egypt.

Now, today, the last Sunday of Advent and Christmas Sunday, we come to the story that we all love so much—the Christmas story from Luke's gospel. We told part of it last Sunday, and today pick up the story of Christ's birth—the manger, the angels, the shepherds, and Mary and Joseph. In reading the whole passage, you may recall the Peanuts Christmas special, where everybody has been doing their own thing, and they're just about ready to duke it out, when Linus, complete with blanket, asks for the lights, and begins reading. "In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus..." You may also remember it from other Christmas pageants that you have been in, or where you have watched your offspring. Or you may remember it from Christmas Eve services. It's such a beautiful, beautiful story.

Karoline Lewis, a Lutheran preaching professor, has a nice take on it. She says, "Part of what Jesus' birth reminds us, every year, is that birth days matter -- on so many levels. I wonder if one way to preach the meaning of Jesus' birth is to preach that it gives meaning to our own. That God was born matters significantly. It means intimacy and love and family, uniqueness and nurture, creation. At the same time, it means everything that is opposite of what I just said. Being pregnant is dangerous. Bringing new life into this world is terrifying. Realizing the responsibility for the care of a child is formidable and frightening. Grieving the loss of a child known only for minutes, days, weeks, or months is sorrow beyond measure. Jesus' birth cannot only speak of the joy of new life. It has to speak into the paradox of what life then entails -- the simultaneity of its wonder and fragility, its re-creation and the need for resurrection, its joy and profound pain."¹ (unquote)

Birthing is a serious and scary business, isn't it? The bringing of new life in the world—it's awesome and it's terrifying. It's always tempting to romanticize Luke's story of the birth of Jesus, to make it like a beautiful Christmas card scene, and there is great beauty in the story. But the story also has in it the dangerous and uncomfortable journey that we talked about last Sunday. It has in it the fact that Mary and Joseph were crowded among strangers who had also come for the census, far from home and family. It has in it the fact that the Roman army, with the power of death, was there to enforce the peace. It has in it the fact that there was almost no hospitality present in a culture where hospitality was a prime virtue—there was no room at the inn, or anywhere else, except the manger—the livestock barn. It has in it the fact that Mary gave birth in a dark and dirty place, and experienced pain and fear in the birthing process. All this—the dislocation, the loneliness, the uncertainty, the fear and pain, all set the context for the beauty that we see in every crèche and manger scene; every Christmas card portrayal of the manger.

And do you know what? All the darkness behind the beauty just adds to the power of what happened there. Out of darkness comes light. Out of loneliness and rejection comes community. Out of weakness comes power. Out of the possibility of death comes new life. Out of human need comes Incarnation. Out of human need comes Incarnation.

God chose to come as a child in an out-of-the-way place; a stable attached to an inn in a small town off the beaten path, born into a humble, powerless family. The angels came to announce and sing of the birth, not to kings or priests, but to shepherds, "in fields where they lay, keeping their sheep."² Couples in the inn might have heard stories about a poor woman giving birth out in the barn, and said tsk, tsk, tsk, and went on eating their

¹ Karoline Lewis, "A Good Day to Be Born," Dear Working Preacher, workingpreacher.org.

² "The First Noel," Chalice Hymnal, 151.

mutton. They had no idea that God was setting the stage to transform the world. They had no idea that 21 centuries later, people would still remember and rejoice about what happened in that stable.

David Lose had a neat insight: "What strikes me is that the events Luke describes also seem incredibly small. I mean, what does Emperor Augustus or Governor Quirinius care about a pregnant teenager or wandering shepherds? Mary, Joseph, and the rest – these folks are so incredibly *small* compared to these rulers. And yet Luke declares that whether these rich and powerful leaders care or not – heck, whether they even *notice* or not – yet the events Luke describes in detail are going to change the whole world.

It's an audacious claim, when you think about it: that the birth of a baby to an unwed teen amid the squalor of a backwater town could possibly matter. And yet there, in a nutshell, is the promise of the Gospel: that God regularly shows up where we least expect God to be and always for us."³ (unquote)

A mother gave birth far from home, in the strangest of places, in an uncertain world. A baby began life in a dark stable. God began a new reality; God began a process of transformation. Angels brought good news to lowly shepherds, and the shepherds came to watch and wonder. And we still sing about it. I mean, what else can you do but sing? Christ the Savior is born, Christ the Savior is born. Amen.

by Michael Dixon

³ David Lose, "The Christmas Story I Need to Hear." Davidlose.net