

St. Mark's Episcopal Church
Albuquerque, New Mexico
Christmas Eve Sermon 2024
Preacher: Christopher McLaren
Text: Luke 2: 1-20

O Holy Night! The stars are brightly shining, / It is the night of the dear Saviour's birth

Tonight, we tell the story of Jesus' birth. It is a wonderful and strange story full of mystery and scandal, poverty and creativity, warmth and danger, joy and worship.

I find birth and adoption stories infinitely interesting because they get us in touch with the beginning of life, the mystery of being, and the blessing of family. I wonder if you can you remember something about your own birth story or that of your children? Is there something unusual or funny or terrifying?

Have you ever asked young children what they know about their birth stories? It can make for a great conversation. Once in a children's chapel a girl told us about her adoption story and how her mother nearly drove off the road when she got the call that they had a child for her, waiting to be picked up! Wow! One told of how they were born 2 months early and there they were healthy and happy right in front of us.

While all of my children's birth stories are interesting, my son Cole's has some twists and turns on the way to the hospital on a Sunday morning after laboring at home for a while my wife and I encountered a huge traffic jam on the interstate. We were stuck and it looked like we would have the baby right there in our Subaru wagon. I called 911 with

my cell phone. The dispatch operator asked if we needed them to send a helicopter to take her to the hospital? I wasn't sure we needed that! What we needed was an escort around the traffic and past whatever was holding things up. We needed a star to guide us to the stable. Minutes later a police cruiser was beside us leading us around miles of traffic and past a burning twisted mass of cars on the bridge. As we went past the fatal auto accident on the bridge, I remember feeling the poignancy of death and new life spun together on that spring morning.

The birth story of Jesus is part of a long and venerable tradition of birth stories in our Scriptures in which God is revealed as intimately and carefully involved in the creation of human life in nearly impossible circumstances.

You may remember:

Abraham and Sarah are given the child Isaac in their old age, “the Lord did for Sarah as he had promised. Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age.” (Genesis 21:1)

Sampson our own strongest man in the world's birth is also miraculous for Manoah and his wife. “And the angel of the Lord appeared to the woman and said to her, ‘Although you are barren, having borne no children, you shall conceive and bear a son.’” (Judges 13:3)

Boaz and Ruth rejoice as well in the uncanny birth of Obed, “The Lord made her conceive and she bore a son.” (Ruth 4:13)

The prophet Samuel was a surprising gift to Elkanah and Hannah, “and the Lord remembered her. In due time Hannah conceived and bore a son. She named him Samuel.” (1 Samuel 1:19-20)

And close to Jesus' birth is the story of Zechariah and Elizabeth Mary's cousin and the birth of the Wildman prophet Johnny B. "But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years." But the angel Gabriel said to Zechariah the priest, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayers have been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John." (Luke 1 7-24).

All of these miraculous births in scripture point to the miraculous birth we celebrate tonight, the birth of Jesus to Mary and Joseph in Bethlehem. In the five births that prefigure the birth of Jesus the mothers from Sarah to Elizabeth all desired and yearned for a child, they prayed for God to help them overcome their barrenness. But for Mary an unwed teenage girl, wanting a child was not something she was praying for. Her impossible condition was virginity, she had no yearning or expectation of a child. She had just become betrothed to Joseph and scandal was not on her mind.

For Mary the announcement and birth of a child is the surprise of creation. As one theologian said, "This is God's initiative going beyond anything man or woman has dreamed of." (Brown) This is the birth that will now set all births under its conditions of God's creative initiative.

Mary's birth is a game changer, now life itself is revealed to be in God's loving hands at all turns, in barrenness, in virginity, in every impossible instance the ability of God to bring forth new life, is demonstrated. God is the God of life and of all creation. God is the God of infinite possibilities. God the creator of heaven and earth is revealed most completely in the birth story of a human child named Jesus.

The good news of Bethlehem, God's gift of surprising life in a stable at Bethlehem reveals creation as gift. Creation, God's gift of life and the conditions necessary for life, our lives, yours and mine are proclaimed in this birth story of a human child in an ordinary stable long ago. Jesus' birth proclaims the good news that God is alive and well and working in creation, and what is more we are invited more deeply into the mystery of creation ourselves. The whole birth story of Jesus is an invitation for us to receive, to enter into and to participate in creation. All of creation belongs to God and therefore so do we, we can live creation, not just use it or take it for granted but live creation. We belong to creation and creation belongs to us.

The gift of this surprising child is really a creation story. John's gospel says it beautifully, "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:14). St. Paul makes it clear that our tradition understands Jesus to have been "born of woman" (Galatians 4:4). While an embarrassment at times we Christians have quietly but firmly insisted that Jesus is human, "the firstborn of all creation." While at the same time, Mary understood to be a virgin, is scriptures way of insisting that the birth of Jesus cannot be understood, reduced to, or accounted for by what we know or can describe from our own experience. In Jesus, life that is unmistakably human is given to us, a real baby from a real mother's womb, suckled at real breasts; but there is also miracle at work in this story. There is mystery that cannot be simply dismissed as we head-centered 21st century people try to bring God's work under our control and understanding.

What on earth is this miracle of the virgin birth meant to evoke in us? This is the craziest thing we've ever heard of and yet Christians have maintained it from the earliest of times and confessed it in their creeds.

One of the greatest theologians of the modern era, Karl Barth described this mystery straightforwardly as, a “summons to reverence and worship.”

This is where the birth at Bethlehem points, to reverence and worship. Artists, poets, musicians, and architects are our primary witnesses to the significance of the meaning of the birth of Jesus. Through their creativity and art, they issue a summons to every human being to “reverence and worship.” Over and over again, graciously they rescue us from a life in which wonder has been drained away. They pull us out of our heads and our rationalism, our skeptical natures, our incredulity by painting Madonnas and shaping loving words with rhythms and juicy metaphors, by filling our ears and hearts with music and carols of joy, by building spaces in which our souls are drawn to God, where we can worship.

I love the poem by Madeleine L’Engle “After Annunciation:”

This is the irrational season
When love blooms bright and wild.
Had Mary been filled with reason
There’d have been no room for the child.

The story of Jesus’ birth is our entry into understanding and participating in the play of creation. But every birth can, if we let it, return us to the wonder of Jesus’ birth, the revelation of life as sheer gift, God’s life with us and for us.

Birth any birth, is our primary access to the creation work of God. We all want to get close to the newborn child, to see the wonder of God’s

new work. Jesus' virgin birth proclaims that God himself is personally present and totally participating in creation, which is good news indeed. Jesus, child of God and child of Mary tells us that we humans are not alone. We've been joined by God in creation. Creation itself proclaims God's presence now.

So, we keep the birth of Jesus fresh in our minds and hearts, alive in our imaginations through prayers, and carols sung by candlelight, through story and image and song. And this in turn makes us alive to every nuance of life around us, to the tiny hands of a newborn child, to the sadness in the eyes of our friend, to the unexpected smile of surprise, to the cry for help from a neighbor, to the grace of growing old. The birth of Jesus tells us that our spirituality is an earthy spirituality but that our life is connected to heaven too. It tells us that spiritual stuff has everything to do with the earthly and that means that Christians are incarnational people. We believe that our obedience, our care, our praise, our wonder, our love, our fears, our loss, our sacrifice evoked by the world around us is what the spiritual life is really about. And this baby born in Bethlehem to a stunned peasant girl and a shocked carpenter are meant to awaken us to the mystery of God that surrounds us here and now. For Christ plays in creation, still just as he did in a manger long ago. In the real stuff of your life, Christ is to be found and that is the real meaning of Christmas of which the angels still sing "glory to God in the highest."

That is the mystery of this Holy Night, that summons us to reverence and worship. For all of life is filled with the glory of God.

A thrill of hope the weary world rejoices,
For yonder breaks a new and glorious morn.

Fall on your knees! O hear the angels' voices!
O night divine, O night when Christ was born;
O night divine, O night, O night Divine.

Note: I am deeply indebted to Eugene Peterson for his writing in Christ Plays in 10,000 places on the mystery of Christ's birth and how it connects us to creation and to life itself.