

Christmas

- In reflecting on the Christmas story, two things stand out for me.
- The first is the reality that the pregnant Mary & her husband, Joseph, had very little power or control over their own circumstances.
- What expectant parents would ever travel to a distant village, away from family & friends when their first-born child was due at any moment?
- Only a family that had no choice but to comply with the demands of an oppressive, occupying government & a complicit religious leadership, both demanding exorbitant civil & temple taxes.
- And then there is the matter of accommodations - no Holiday Inn here; no welcoming concierge; no room service - only a shelter for animals, only socially unacceptable shepherds - socially unacceptable because they smelled like the sheep they tended – possibly sheep the temple priests used for sacrifice.
- The picture Luke paints is that of a low-income family, on the margins of society, desperately seeking shelter so that Mary could labour & give birth protected from the elements.
- I wonder how many refugee families from Ukraine, Syria, Iraq, Iran, Nigeria or Yemen find themselves in similarly desperate circumstances this very night.
- The second thing that stands out for me is how easily Luke glides over the messy realities of labor & birth.
- We hear a lot about the politics requiring Joseph to register in his home-town, about the shepherds keeping watch, & about heavenly hosts of angels celebrating - all the good stuff.
- Of the actual birth we learn only the basics: it was time; the baby was born; they wrapped the baby in blankets; & that's pretty much it.
- If ever you wondered about who wrote Luke's gospel, I think we can be pretty sure of one thing at least - this gospel has to have been written by a man.
- So tonight/today, I'm going to take a risk of being criticized for taking a perspective that's not my own – that of a male priest homilist, but that of a woman, more specifically I thought I'd gain insights from a midwife.
- I thought it might be good to consider the reality of what we celebrate from what a woman might remember if she were the one telling the story about a birth that changed the course of history.
- If you think about it, it's interesting that no one ever includes the midwife in our Nativity scenes - We always find Mary, Joseph, baby Jesus, shepherds, angels & wise men - we find donkeys, cows, sheep, sometimes Santa Claus & every so often a little drummer boy, but do we ever find a midwife? No! Why not?
- No one seriously thinks that Joseph, as devoted as he was, actually delivered this baby do we? In first century Palestine, it would have been inconceivable for a woman to give birth without the care & comfort of other women, & in particular the care of women the French call, sages-femmes - wise women - the French word for midwives.

- Even though Mary & Joseph were far from home, hospitality was pretty much relied upon & offered by the peoples of Palestine, so I imagine that the innkeeper, or more probably his wife, saw Mary's plight & sent for the wise women of Bethlehem to come & tend to her.
- As a first time mother, there were no guarantees that Mary would emerge from her ordeal alive.
- Scholars estimate that maternal mortality rates were as high as 35% in the 1st century; everyone would have known cousins, wives, sisters, aunts & neighbors who had died in childbirth.
- And while Mary & Joseph may well have been more optimistic than most - given biblical accounts of the reassuring mystical experiences surrounding Mary's pregnancy - this would have been a very scary time for both of them.
- I'd imagine that Mary's labour probably began enroute to Bethlehem.
- In Luke's story, Mary was probably well into her labor before finally finding shelter - when active labour arrived at last surely the midwives had also arrived to help Mary manage her rapid, excruciatingly painful contractions & to show Joseph just how to support her as she began the arduous effort of pushing the newborn Jesus into a waiting world & more immediately, into the midwives' waiting arms.
- We won't dwell on Mary's anguished cries, her sweat, her blood, or her tears, but I'm sure that when that baby Jesus appeared at last, there was no need for chanting angels, because the joy & wonder reflected in Mary & Joseph's faces, would have shown more brightly than any guiding star.
- The long-awaited child is born, Mary is safe, & Joseph as proud & relieved as any new Dad trying not to faint over the intensity of watching his wonder woman wife give birth - Mary labored long & well to birth a child who would be all about God's everlasting love.
- When he was old enough she would teach him the religious traditions of Judaism - summed up in her Magnificat hymn about a God who fills the hungry with good things & raises up the lowly.
- Her boy-child would become a man of peace who died a violent death even as he laboured to bring forth her Magnificat - God's justice & kingdom in the face of hatred.
- So, my question for each of us tonight/today, is to ask in what way are we labouring, like Mary to birth God's abiding love into a world so much in need of it?
- In what way are we, like Joseph, supporting the efforts of all who labour on behalf of the marginalized - refugees, immigrants, the homeless poor or victims of sex-trafficking?
- In what way are we, like the midwives, supporting our powerful birthing God, who longs for right relationship & protection of a Mother Earth that in fact, gave birth to us all?
- Christ brought a message & was the message & inspiration to live more humanely.

- At Christmas God comes to take possession of our hearts, if we are open to it, just as in the first Christmas he came & took possession of the world to transform it & set people free to be who God calls them to be.
- And now he says to us what he already said to the world through the birth of Jesus - I am with you. I am the hope for change; Christ has changed the world with his presence & can continue to do that through us.
- We are living in challenging times, as all times are in varying ways & degrees.
- The power & presence of Jesus is as necessary today as it ever has been.
- To be given access to this power is a remarkable sign of God's love for us.
- This Christmas, let us reflect on this gift of God, that knowing our personal need to be strengthened & changed, he entered human history as a baby out of love for you & me to give us the capacity to be more than we are.
- In turn, may we be able to be agents of change in our own time.
- There is still much for Christ & His Church to do.
- There are still places, hearts, lives in need of light.
- Let us offer our hearts; our voices, minds & hands for His mission in our world to make it more human in the ways we touch the world.
- May God bless each of you & your families on this Christmas day & every day of your lives.