

EXPECTING A BABY

Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton

December 20, 2009

Scripture: Micah 5:2-5a; Luke 1:39-56

In these last days before Christmas, it finally boils down to this: we are expecting a baby, a child to be born in our midst who will be the fulfillment of many hopes.

Of course, it's really a birth long ago that we remember and for which we give thanks. Not one that we literally expect in a few days. But somehow we rehearse it each year and relive it as if it were once again the birth of our savior here and now, as it was there and then. The prophecies of the season have surrounded us with this very specific anticipation.

Isaiah puts it this way, "A virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel." And elsewhere Isaiah promises, "... unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given." Jeremiah tells us, "In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David..." And Micah, in the passage today speaks of a pregnancy and a birth, "[The Lord] ...shall give them up until the time when she who is in labor has brought forth ... And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the Lord..."

There is something about waiting for a baby that makes us all very aware of our finite nature, our delineation by a measure of days, our mortal nature marked by seasons.

Maybe that's why the story that Luke tells of Elizabeth and Mary who compare notes on their pregnancies is of particular importance for us to hear. It exemplifies the intimate and personal nature of what it is that we expect. And it is a rare moment in the Bible as well, to hear the secret confidences of two women speaking in private. *Who was it that recorded this conversation?* And of all the possible subjects we might hear from them or that Luke might report to us, Elizabeth and Mary speak of their pregnancies. This is daring stuff for both religious literature and for theological understanding.

The conversation between Elizabeth and Mary, her kinswoman, is the kind of conversation that men don't always get to hear, though more and more as couples talk about "our" being pregnant, men get included in more than they once did, minus the pain of childbirth.

Nevertheless, I feel like an intruder, an eavesdropper at the door in Elizabeth's house. On the television series *Mad Men*, which revisits the customs, styles and morés of the early 1960's, Mary's and Elizabeth's conversation would be the exchange that would go on in the kitchen while the husbands are out in the living room smoking pipes and watching the game. It is the private exchange of two women speaking of conception and birth, contractions and kicking in the womb, joy at pregnancy and the prayer of a mother giving thanks for the responsibility of giving life.

The heart of the exchange, of course, is that song that Mary sings which begins in Latin *Magnificat*, My soul magnifies the Lord... a prayer and a song that calls down

justice from on high, pointing to a day when God will settle accounts, bringing down the powerful and lifting up the lowly, filling the hungry and sending the rich away empty.

And while that is a sermon in itself, perhaps a series of sermons, it's really the larger and more intimate issue of Mary and Elizabeth's condition that interests me, this very concrete reminder that for all of the Christmas cards with a beatific scene of the lowly manger, the holy family and the friendly beasts, the kindly shepherds and the noble magi, there was a *birth* born of *labor and pain* on Christmas Eve. The culmination of a pregnancy, leading to contractions, leading to water breaking and a sweaty, bloody, breathless, heaving, pushing birth; life giving life to life as we all were given it.

It was risky and real. The earnest longing of a woman and her husband to fulfill a calling that was bigger than themselves. To take on a responsibility that was more than they had ever known before, and to throw body and soul into the effort.

That longing to bring life from life is something we know here in this youthful congregation. There are many churches with young members. But I do not know of a congregation of families quite like the ones in this church who have worked so hard and been so persistent and have pledged so bravely their desire to support and care for their children in a community quite like this.

We are blessed in so many ways as a congregation to have these remarkable families in our midst. The world can rail about normalcy; what is normal and what is not, what is right and what is not, but here in this congregation we are living out the broadest of definitions of *family* and we are taking our baptismal vows seriously, supporting one another with the deepest of sincerity about what it is to be a parent and to raise a child, and to take into one's household and life another human being who needs the care and love and devotion of supportive parents, however those parents came to be parents.

It is commonplace here for two mom and two dad parents to present their children for baptism. And standing side by side with them sometimes are parents who have traveled the world and waded through interminable red tape and gone to unbelievable places to bring home a child who is theirs now, and so ours by baptism, as well.

This is an act of bravery oftentimes, a statement against convention, a statement that confronts the world's values, a defiance of old patterns that no longer define the boundaries of family. A family is defined, after all, not so much by blood as by covenant, not so much by likeness as by love. Unconventional families are something Christians should understand, because our Lord was born under the most unconventional of circumstances, and don't you just know that controversy followed that young couple around Nazareth from the moment Mary announced her pregnancy onward.

Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan in their book, *The First Christmas*, help us understand the iconoclastic nature of the circumstances of Jesus' birth. They write:

The stories of Jesus birth are more than sentimental. The stories of the first Christmas are both personal and political.... Set in their first-century context, they are

comprehensive and passionate visions of another way of seeing life and of living our lives.

They challenge the common life, the status quo, of most times and places. Even as they are tidings of comfort and joy, they are edgy and challenging. They confront “normalcy,” ...the way most societies, most human cultures, have been and are organized.¹

There were, after all, two major scandals about Jesus life which the early church had to address. The first was that Jesus died looking very much like a criminal; dying, in fact between two convicted criminals, one a thief, and by the other’s admission, both deserving of their punishment. Few in the first century could understand how it was that a good man like Jesus about whom such bold claims were made could end his life with a death sentence as he did.

The other scandal was Jesus’ parentage, the ambiguity of pregnancy prior to marriage, and the claim of Mary and Joseph that this was the child of the Holy Spirit. The stories of Jesus’ birth, like the stories of his death challenge the status quo.

This is good news in a world in which conception, more and more, occurs in ways unknown in prior times, what with the breakthroughs of science, and the breaking of conventions that have occurred. The fact that Jesus’ origins, by the Holy Spirit, were what they were give us comfort today in surprising ways, and casts into a new light the changed way we understand the claim that we are all God’s children, and that we belong to each other.

Christmas, we wrongly say, is for children. And while there is much about Christmas that children enjoy more than anyone else perhaps, the mysteries and surprises and stories of the season, it is also a time when the dearest hopes and fondest dreams of any of us who have ever wanted to be parents are remembered and treasured and honored.

A few years ago the late Lewis Smedes of Fuller Theological Seminary, wrote about his and his wife’s experience of the fragile and delicate thing that yearning for a child is. He describes that thin veil between heaven and earth that pregnancy exposes.

Smedes writes:

We had spent a decade making love according to a schedule set by four different fertility clinics in three different countries. And finally, after one summer night’s lark on the sand dunes of Lake Michigan with no thought but love, Doris became a medically certified pregnant woman.

Six months along and doing fine, we thought -- with God answering our prayers it could be no other way but fine -- she suddenly one night began losing amniotic fluid. I called her doctor. ‘She’s going into labor,’ he said. “Get her to the hospital as fast as you can.” And then he said he was sorry, but our baby was going to be badly malformed.

"How badly?"

"Very."

We fumbled silent and bewildered into the car. I told her. We cried. And we promised God and each other that we would love the child no matter how damaged she or he was. After Doris had been tucked in, I went to the waiting room to worry for a few hours. Suddenly, Doris's doctor broke in and exulted: "Congratulations, Lew, you are the father of a perfect man-child." I told Doris the news. She was skeptical, but I went home and danced like a delirious David before the Lord.

Next day, just before noon, our pediatrician called: I had better come right down to the hospital. When I met him he told me that our miracle child was dead. Two mornings later, with a couple of friends at my side and our minister reading the ceremony, we buried him "in the sure and certain hope of the resurrection." Doris never got to see her child.

A pious neighbor comforted me by reminding me that "God was in control." I wanted to say to her, "Not this time." It seems to me that the privilege of being the delicate organisms we are in the kind of world we live in comes at a price. The price is that things can go wrong, badly wrong sometimes, which should come as no surprise.²

Doris and Lew Smedes' experience, it seems to me, is a story we need to hear in these Advent days. Partly because it is the experience of so many people. A pregnancy that does not take, a miscarriage that led to a painful and premature birth and then, loss. But we also need to hear it because it reminds us of what an incredible risk God took on us to take on human flesh, to be born the child of Mary. How did Smedes put it... "the privilege of being the delicate organisms we are in the kind of world we live in comes at a price." And for God that price was to become human. To know the pain of daily life, to experience the vulnerability of being flesh and blood. He who knew no sin, became subject to the suffering of sinful humanity.

What if God's plan had not worked? What if this great risk that God was taking on us had been foiled somehow? What if, among all the babies killed by Herod in that slaughter of the innocents that Matthew reports, Jesus had been taken and killed?

Or what if any of the primary actors in the pageant had not fulfilled their part? What if Joseph had gotten cold feet and had not taken Mary to be his wife? He was after all tempted to put Mary away quietly, without controversy. And Mary, herself, questioned in her heart the idea that she should be the mother of a child of special origins, when she was yet a virgin. But nonetheless, it came to pass as the prophets foretold it, and God became flesh and dwelt among us.

And why? Why did God do such a thing? Why did God risk it all to take on human flesh and reach across the chasm of eternity to join us in our mortality?

Maybe it's because of something like this...

Mark Ramsey, Pastor of Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church in Asheville, North Carolina in an article in the *Journal for Preachers* reminded me of something Anne Lamott describes in her book *Operating Instructions*, a best seller about the first year of her son Sam's life.

Anne had taken Sam to Lake Tahoe, where they stayed in a condominium by the lake. Now Lake Tahoe, along with beautiful blue water is also known, on the Nevada side for some pretty posh gambling casinos. These gambling casinos are 24-7/365 operations. And for the convenience of the gamblers the rooms come with curtains and shades that block all sunlight so you can gamble all night and sleep all day.

One afternoon Anne put Sam to sleep in his playpen in the pitch dark bedroom and went to do some writing in the next room. A little while later she heard her baby knocking on the door from inside. She got up to put him back to bed and then — experienced every parent's worst nightmare— she found the door locked.

Somehow he had managed to push the button on the doorknob and locked himself in. He was calling, "Mommy, Mommy," and she was saying, "Just jiggle the doorknob, darling, push the button again." Of course, he couldn't even see the doorknob in the darkened room. When it became clear to him that his mother couldn't open the door, panic set in. He began sobbing. And Anne did everything she could to get the door to work; calling the rental agency where she left a message, calling the manager; running back and forth to comfort her son. While all the time Sam was lost in the dark, terrified.

Finally she did the only thing she could, which was to lie down and slide her fingers underneath the door where there were a few centimeters of space. She kept telling him over and over to bend down and find her fingers. And somehow he did.

They stayed like that for a really long time, him holding her fingers in the dark, reaching across the divide, and feeling each other's presence and comfort and love.

That is what God did for us in Jesus Christ. Though separated by the darkness and the veil between heaven and earth, God reached under the door and offered us himself so that we may know in flesh and blood that we are not alone.

This is why it is that at the end of these days it is finally a baby we are expecting, for God knows no better way to come to us than to reach under the door bringing flesh and blood to flesh and blood, binding heaven to earth once and for all.

For if we never touch one another, how would we ever know that we are not alone?

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¹ Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, *The First Christmas*. (New York, HarperOne, 2007) viii.

² Lewis B. Smedes, A Father Grieves the Loss of A Child. *The Christian Century*, May 3, 2003, pp. 38-39. The Christian Century Foundation.