

Christmas Eve 2019

“The Trouble With Christmas: Troubled Beginning”

Luke 2:1-20

Our Advent sermon series, called The Trouble With Christmas, has included a look at Jesus’ family tree full of ‘sinners and outsiders,’ Joseph’s dilemma of loving Mary but needing to honor God’s law (“How can I divorce her in a merciful way?”), and Mary’s struggle to say “Yes” to God – knowing it would lead to a lot of scorn and misunderstanding. The Christmas story isn’t as tidy and effortless as we might be led to believe. For the last month, we’ve tried to imagine what happened in between the verses depicting Mary and Joseph’s obedience: what they felt and struggled with in real time; how God’s reassurance was needed more than once along the way; how troubled they must have been at any given time. But we also saw how their hopes, expectations, and familiarity with God’s promises in scripture made them more attentive and ready for Messiah to arrive than any one of us would be today. They were focused and expectant; not distracted, busy, and fixated with online purchasing, impeachment hearings, and Star Wars finales.

And now we get to the actual birth event itself. Nativity scenes and Christmas cards (and Christmas Eve sermons) often don’t help us capture what was so troubling about the literal coming of Christ into the world; His actual birth. Take a good look at some of these scenes. Based on what gets depicted, it doesn’t appear there were any troubles whatsoever. It’s as if Mary barely broke a sweat and Joseph was calm, cool, and collected throughout the whole ordeal. Not having ever given birth myself, I sometimes wonder what women think when they see this.

On Christmas Eve we tend to move pretty quickly through Luke 2:1-7. We want to get to the angel and concert put on by the ‘heavenly hosts’ – where the action seems to be. But there are a few verses right off the bat that should trouble us . . . or make us wonder . . . or lead us to ask some questions . . . or draw us into a reality that Christmas cards and Nativity scenes just don’t communicate. There were a LOT of troubling circumstances surrounding the birth of Jesus. The political climate; the scandal of an unwed mother; the reality of extreme poverty; a super high infant mortality rate. The list goes on.

In 1223, St. Francis put out the first nativity scene in Italy to show the dire circumstances Jesus was born into. He explained why he set up that first nativity display: (SLIDE) “I want to do something that will recall the memory of that Child who was born in Bethlehem, to see with bodily eyes [see for ourselves] the inconveniences of his infancy, how he lay in the manger, and how the ox and ass stood by.”

St. Francis had no idea what kind of conveniences would be available 8 centuries later. He couldn’t have known what would be in place for labor and delivery from a technological

standpoint, or the incredible birthing suites and all the comforts offered to new moms, dads, and babies. I've noticed the "battle for birthing" going on right here in our valley between hospitals. "Come to our hospital! We have candlelight dinners for couples after the baby is born." St. Francis had no idea how much of an understatement the word "inconvenience" would be. Christmas was NOT convenient at all.

Christmas is about God in the flesh. That's risky business and includes the risks of pregnancy and birth – then and now. Unfortunately, some of us know those risks all too well.

So what does Luke leave out regarding Jesus' actual birth?

Well . . . if Mary was pregnant . . . and travelling . . . and gave birth in an outbuilding/cave . . . and it was her first baby . . . and she was a young teenager . . . and this was Joseph's first delivery (even if there was a midwife, as some suggest) . . . doesn't that sound risky? And wasn't it much more earthy than verse 7 which says, "And she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped Him in cloths and placed Him in a manger (feeding trough), because there was no room for them in the inn." (Luke 2:7)

[For a great depiction of what it was probably like, read the earthy and more graphic details of the birth of Jesus in The Book of God, by Walter Wangerin]

Birth in general, on a good day, is messy stuff. Does it trouble you to think that God went through all that? Does it bother you that He took such a huge risk to enter in such a human way? It has bothered many over the centuries, and the early Christians had to continually fight Gnosticism that kept trying to separate the earthy humanity of Jesus from His divinity. Do you think it was risky for God to enter this world as a helpless baby, or do you have a romantic/spiritualized picture that everything went just "perfectly" and "all was calm, all was brightly" and Jesus was "sleep[ing] in heavenly peace?" (from Silent Night) If Jesus was truly, fully human that means He had a real birth. That means His entrance into the world was messy and bloody and unsafe.

Has it dawned on you that the "Good News of great joy that was for ALL the people" was only possible because God took a huge risk and put His life in the balance/on the line for us – not only at the end of His life on the cross but at the beginning of His life in the manger? It has been argued that there is no such thing as love that doesn't involve risk.

For just a moment, I want to invite all of us to consider the risk, the sweat, the blood of His birth: both those who believe and those who don't.

If you are a follower of Jesus, have you lost the awe and wonder of all this? Are we guilty of taking the reality of Jesus' humble and sacrificial birth for granted? Are we so familiar with the way nativity scenes depict the holy family that we've grown numb to how down-to-earth it all was?

AND . . . If you're somewhat skeptical about this whole Christmas story . . . maybe it's because the story of Jesus' birth has been presented to you as too idyllic and not earthy or honest enough for you to connect with in real life. Would you maybe reconsider the fact that God, in Jesus, is about as earthy as they come? He 'gets it' – being human.

I know some will be bothered (“troubled”) if we don't at least mention the shepherds and angels. So, let's remember what was declared on a dark, starry night: “I am bringing you good news of great joy for ALL the people.” (Luke 2:10)

If we must move to the fields where the angelic hosts appeared to the shepherds, trouble waits for us there as well. For we must deal with the troubling nature that God was offering something good and joy-producing for “ALL” – EVERYONE! Not just for the good and joyful people . . . ALL. Not just the people like you and me . . . ALL.

Do you see that there is not only the risk of being born in the flesh (blood, sweat, and tears), but the risk of doing something so loving for EVERYBODY? Some people can't believe in a God who would love, give a second chance to, forgive, and die for a murderer, a leader who isn't very likeable, a child abuser, a con artist, a greedy business person, or that person who gossiped about you so long ago and destroyed your reputation or embarrassed you beyond belief.

We may think we're good with the fact that God loves “everybody” until we start getting specific about who that includes: Adolph Hitler, Idi Amin, Sadaam Hussein . . . and the list goes on. Reading through the Psalms with Tim Keller yesterday led me through two verses in Psalm 145 (verses 8-9) that focus on God's compassion, grace and love for “ALL.” After his comments, Keller included this honest prayer: “Lord, I confess that . . . I want You to be loving only to certain people. I give lip service to ‘loving everyone,’ but I don't really do it. Teach me to be compassionate to all you have made. Help me to start by being patient with that person in my life I struggle so much to love. Amen.” (from The Songs of Jesus, by Tim and Kathy Keller)

The Good News of Christmas is that God took a huge risk to be born in the flesh because He loves EVERYONE. And this is really GOOD NEWS for all of us. It sets us free to be loved and stop wondering if we're lovable enough – or what we still have to do to be more loveable. It also frees us up to love others and stop wondering if they are loveable enough. Do you want to be the person who gets to decide who is too bad, and who is ‘good enough’? Do you want someone else to make those decisions? The Good News is that “none of us are good enough” but that Jesus came as the only “good enough” human being who would provide the perfect sacrifice (fully God and fully human), and rescue EVERYONE on our very messy, bloody, tear-stained and earthy planet.