

“She Gave Birth”

Luke 2:1-20

It was Saturday morning, the last day of May, 1986. As Danette and I sat down to breakfast, alone for the last time, she complained of a stomach pain. We were nine months pregnant and I could feel my heartbeat begin to quicken. Maybe this was to be the day.

Danette was not being forced to ride a donkey for the 80 mile jaunt between Nazareth and Jerusalem for some census. We were in a very comfortable parsonage just two blocks from the hospital. Maybe a donkey ride would have helped. The pains remained far apart all morning. In the afternoon we decided to walk to an auction taking place around the corner. Maybe the walk would speed up the process. It didn't.

That evening things seemed to be speeding up enough that we walked to the hospital. We settled in for a long night of back labor, back rubs, paper bag breathing, being yelled at to “wake up,” and wondering who was going to lead the worship services in the morning. My sermon was prepared but I would be in a daze.

Morning came and still no birth. The wife of the husband and wife doctor team came strolling into our hospital room. She took one look at my half-closed eyes, another look at a soon to be mother in more pain than ever, then offered to

lead the worship services that morning. I half-smiled and said, “Thank you.”

Somewhere around 11:30 on Sunday morning, June 1, 1986, Rachel Megan slowly but surely came into the world. A special gift from God that the nurse almost immediately handed to me after wrapping her in swaddling clothes. I smiled, handed her to Danette, and went home and passed out for the afternoon. She gave birth. And there was great joy.

In mid-December of that same year, 1986, the phone rang out in the middle of the night. When you’re a pastor and your phone rings in the middle of the night, you can pretty much assume that something bad has happened or is happening. It was a nurse calling from the Rugby, N.D. Hospital 30 miles away. One of your young parishioners is having difficulty giving birth. We have just transported her from the Rolette Hospital to the Rugby Hospital. The baby’s heartbeat is quickened and irregular. We are considering a C-section. Could you come to the hospital right away.

Once again in a daze, I quickly threw some clothes on. I jumped in my car and began the 30 mile jaunt to Rugby on a snowy and icy road. The 30 miles gave me plenty of time to think back a few months to June 1 and the joy that Danette and I had experienced as first time parents. This was to be this couple’s first child as well.

As I approached the nurse’s station, body language told me that all was not

well. The mother had given birth, but something was wrong with the baby. After working on the baby for an hour, she died. Even an autopsy later on could not determine the cause.

I joined the parents in the hospital room. There was a long silence. I held the mother's hand. Finally, she looked up at me and said, "Would you baptize Kathryn?" Again there was silence. I responded with a very feeble, "Yes." I asked the nurse to bring Kathryn into the room with a large bowl of water. With tears in her eyes, the nurse merely said, "O.K."

She quickly returned dragging a cart with a bowl of water on it with one hand and a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths in her other arm. I reach out my hands and she laid Kathryn in my arms and she felt very heavy and very lifeless. I unfolded the cloths, revealing the face of a beautiful little girl, the first born.

I shifted her weight to one arm, turned toward her parents, and reached down into the water with the other hand. I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. She gave birth. And there was great sorrow.

A few years later, in 1989, I spent two days living in the house of a peasant farming family in central Nicaragua. This family was extremely poor. The first night in that house I sat down on a wooden bench across from a father and his 26 year-old son sitting next to one another on a homemade burlap hammock. We

talked of politics and religion. We talked of Ortega and Reagan. Alfonso handed me his AKA, automatic rifle, and he explained how he must help defend his village from Contra attacks during the night. But most of all, we talked of family.

A small baby, maybe 6 months old, began crying on the dirt floor next to us. The father and son, accustomed to a noisy house, 14 people living in two small rooms, eight of them children; they kept talking as though everything was normal. I finally interrupted the conversation and picked up the naked little girl in my arms. She stopped crying immediately. Her big dark eyes looked deeply into mine. I was no doubt the first white person she had ever seen, and the strange sounds of English coming from my mouth baffled her. The son smiled at me. The father lit his first American cigarette and inhaled deeply.

The topic of conversation turned to this baby's father. An 18 year old son who was away serving his mandatory 2 years in the army. He was in a platoon unit, a small group that kept to the mountains, actively seeking out and pursuing groups of Contras. They explained to me that Contras never willingly engaged the army, they have no military objective, that they almost exclusively attack civilians. Little did I know that three mornings later our group would experience the results of such an attack.

Still holding the quiet little baby in my arms, an embarrassed young mother walked up to me and gently lifted her away, not saying a word. I smiled and took a

picture of Danette, Rachel, and I out of my pocket and handed it to her. Her eyes lit up and she returned my smile. I told her she could keep the picture if she would allow me to take her picture, for she was a beautiful mother with a beautiful baby nestled to her bosom.

This time there was no swaddling cloths. There was no hospital room. There was no water of baptism. Just a naked baby clinging to a very young mother dressed in old and shattered clothes. Could this be Mary? I took the picture and it will be forever etched in my memory. And there was great joy.

Read Luke 2:1-7 (Holy Family enters)

Another very young and pregnant woman and a very young man have been on the road all day long. They finally find a small cave smelling and warmed with the scent of animals, horses, pigs, sheep, chickens, manure, and hay. They go in amongst the animals and carve themselves out a place to sleep.

No sooner does the man doze off to sleep when the woman begins to have labor pains. His eyes open wide and he knows he's in trouble. There will be no hospital. There will be no midwife. There will only be man, woman, and the animals.

He stays awake with her through the night. Whenever the labor pains come he frantically rubs her back and tries to get her to breathe regularly. Neither the rubbing or the breathing helps much, but it keeps him awake and busy.

Finally, the early morning sun rises but he hardly notices. He has lost track of time. He is awake but in a daze. Then her pains become less intense and he knows the time is near. Only his prayers and his adrenalin keep him going. He awaits the arrival of a new life.

She begins to push down hard and he can see the crown of the head and some matted down hair. She pushes down hard again and the whole face appears. He is trembling, but is able to help the baby the rest of the way. The body, the feet, and in a split second the baby is out of the womb and into the world. His father cuts the cord, cleans him up, and hands him to his mother.

And there was great joy. She nestles her newborn son close to her as he opens his eyes for the first time and looks into his mother's eyes. The baby makes his first whimpering sounds as he lays in his mother's arms. She wraps him in strips of cloth and lays him in a manger that Dad had hurriedly prepared during the night.

With her baby taken care of, Mom looks back to Dad and finds him passed out on a pile of straw next to the donkey. She smiles. She thinks there will be no flowers, or gifts, or family visitors. But she doesn't care. She has the greatest gift of all. A newborn son. She lays back to rest but she cannot sleep because he has so much to think about, so much to be thankful for. She ponders all these things in her heart as she listens to Dad snoring away on his pile of straw.

Read Luke 2:8-20

“Night was coming on, and it was cold,” the shepherd said, “and I was terribly hungry.” I had finished all the bread I had in my sack, and my gut still asked for more. Then I noticed my friend, a shepherd like me, about to throw away a crust he didn’t want. So I said, “Throw the crust to me friend!” and he did throw it to me, but it landed between us in the mud where the sheep had mucked it up. But I grabbed it anyway and stuffed it, mud and all, into my mouth. And as I was eating it, I suddenly saw – myself. It was as if I was not only a man eating but a man watching the man eating. And I thought, “the bread is who I am. I am a man who eats muddy bread.” And I thought, “the bread is very good. And I thought, “Ah, the mud is very good too.” So I opened my muddy man’s mouth full of bread and I yelled to my friends, “By God, it’s good, brothers!” And they thought I was a terrible fool, but they saw what I meant. We saw everything that night, everything.

Can I make you understand, I wonder? Have you ever had this happen to you? You have been working hard all day. You’re dog-tired, bone-tired. So you call it quits for awhile. You slump down under a tree or against a rock and just sit there in a daze; for half an hour or a million years, I don’t know, and all this time your eyes are wide open looking straight ahead someplace, but they’re so tired and glassy they don’t see a thing. Nothing. Then, little by little, you begin to come to,

then your eyes begin to come to, and all of a sudden you realize you've been looking at something the whole time except it's only now you really see it – one of the lambs maybe, with its foot caught under a rock, or the moon scorching a hole through the clouds. It was there all the time, and you were looking at it all the time, but you didn't see it till just now.

That's how it was this night. Like finally coming to – not things coming out of nowhere that had never been there before, but things coming into focus that had been there always. The air wasn't just emptiness anymore. It was alive! Brightness everywhere, dipping and wheeling like a flock of birds. And what you always thought was silence stopped being silent and turned into the beating of wings, thousands and thousands of them. Only not just wings, but voices – high, wild, like trumpets. The words I would never remember later, but something like what I yelled with a mouth full of bread. “By God, it's good, brothers! The crust. The mud. Everything!”

We tore off across that muddy field like drunks and drunk we were, crazy drunk, splashing through a sea of wings and moonlight and the silvery wool of the sheep. Was it night? Was it day? Did our feet touch the ground?

(Shepherds enter)

“Shh, you'll wake up my guests,” said the innkeeper we met coming in the other direction with his arms full of wood. And when we got to the stable, a man

held a finger to his lip's. Shh!

In the eye of the storm, you know, there is no wind – nothing moves – nothing breathes – just silence. Hush. There he is. You see him? You see him? Open your eyes. Listen.

My hope is that with the sharing of these stories of birth and death, of joy and sorrow, you will be moved to meditate on what the coming of the Christ child means for you in your life.

If a loved one has died in the past year, you are experiencing your first Christmas without that person. Christmas may not be as joy-filled as in past years and yet you can sit and think about Christmases past and what they have meant. Death tends to force us to reflect on the meaning of Christmas.

Many in our parish have been blessed with babies in the past year. A new child always gives Christmas new meaning and importance. The birth is fresh in our minds and we can better understand the feelings and joy of Mary and Joseph on that first Christmas day. And so we sit and watch our baby play with her new toys and we are thankful that we have been so blessed with this gift from God. And we are thankful that the same Jesus that has been here for us, will be here for our children and grandchildren.

People who have been affected by death or the birth of a baby will take the time to reflect on the meaning of Christmas. The rest of us need to follow their

example and Mary's example. Today, ponder these things in your hearts. This very day in David's town your Savior was born – Christ the Lord! Your Savior was born. It is not Christmas for you unless Christ is reborn in you. Let that happen today. Glory to God in the highest, and peace on earth among all people.

#283 - O Come, All Ye Faithful