

Sermon: Christmas Eve

The Rev... Mike Wernick

December 24, 2017

Year A
Isaiah 9:2-7
Psalm 96
Titus 2:11-14
Luke 2:1-20

My former wife and I wanted a midwife to deliver our baby... we were living in a small town in southeastern Iowa... a town where many of the residents were "New Age" people... where there were health food stores... and vegetarian restaurants... and an AyurVedic medical clinic... a town where twice a day... four thousand people meditated together in two Golden Domes... and a midwife seemed to resonate with us... seemed right somehow... and the hospital could always be Plan B if needed... but only if needed... so we were referred to a midwife by our family doctor... and made an appointment... and saw her several times... and got pre-natal vitamins... and smiled smiles...

But then we found out a few months later... that when our baby was supposed to get ready to be born... when she was supposed to turn upside down... get lined up just right in the birth canal... she refused... I like to think she got this from me... she was literally right side up... but to come into the world... she was upside down... head up... and with one knee up... it's called footling breech... and first babies are rarely delivered this way...

So we tried something called a fetal-version... *version* as in... inversion... as in turning upside down... and so we made an appointment... and there were IV muscle relaxers... and expert pushers who pushed from the outside... and tried to turn that little girl around... tried to turn her world upside down... but it was too uncomfortable for her mom... and it wasn't working... so that didn't work...

So they told us to buy a long wide board... and put one end on the couch and the other end on the floor... and have her mom lie on it head down... with her world upside

down... down at an angle... for as many hours as she could stand it... they thought that maybe... we could trick the baby into turning herself around... but that didn't work either...

So they said... this birth would need to be a Caesarian birth... the at-home midwife thing was too risky... maybe if this had been the second or third child... but for the first... too risky... so they got out their little calendars... and said "let's schedule this"... and we defiantly said... NO WAY... there'd be no scheduling... if we couldn't have a natural health-food-baby birth... if there had to be operating rooms and scalpels... then we were just going to wait until the baby was ready to come... until she was ready to be born... and not when it was convenient for them... and they said... well... what could they say...

So at about two o'clock in the morning... on August 23, 1988... there was a gush of water... and we called the hospital... and drove the fourteen hundred... I mean the two miles... to get there... and I was allowed... in blue scrubs and a mask they'd given me... into the operating room to watch the C-section... and stood by... as Joseph probably stood by... during the birth... as new life came into the world... as our own miracle was born...

The time came for Mary to deliver her child... and you mothers know you can put that kind of thing off for only so long... but there was no room at the Inn... so they went in to where the animals slept... and the wooden feeding trough where the infant Jesus was laid down could not have been as soft as the hospital basinet in which my daughter was placed... the bands of cloth in which Jesus was swaddled could not have been as sanitary as the newborn outfit my daughter wore... the air which Jesus breathed could not have smelled as fresh or been as warm as the air which my daughter breathed...

But I have to believe... that Mary and Joseph loved their son... as much as my daughter's mother and I loved her... and that the awesome tenderness with which Mary

and Joseph cared for him... was the same tenderness with which her mother and I cared for Rachel...

UCC Minister Martha Spong writes... Mark brings us Jesus ready to walk into the Jordan... and John draws him as particularly philosophical... Matthew offers an infant Jesus... but his narrative points not to women but to men: a husband... a wicked king and his counselors... and three wise ones from the East... only Luke brings us into a stable... to the side of Jesus' mother... and into Mary's heart... Luke helps us see... that a baby's arrival changes things... habits... attitudes... and feelings... A baby is helpless... yet powerful... a baby is challenging... yet winsome... we gladly rearrange our schedules... our lives... and our home... to make room for the baby...

We also rearrange our homes for the Christmas season... making room for decorations... and the tree... and the nativity set... Joel and I have seasonal table runners we put out... colored lights... wooden cranberries that are hung... wooden shoes and stockings... the Charlie Brown Christmas tree with its one... lonely... red ball... and the new German Feather tree with Swiss flags and straw ornaments and antique ornaments... and yes... we have a nativity set... the Wise Men will be added on January 6... but for now there are sheep and goats and an ox and a donkey and a dog and cats and all kinds of birds... and shepherds... and angels... and Joseph and Mary...

Joseph is standing nearby... as I did... a witness to things that are out of his control... and that were out of mine... the baby Jesus has been tucked away in a display cabinet... lying down for now next to a small sleeping Siamese cat... until we get home tonight... and Mary is waiting... kneeling down in expectation and wonder... waiting for the manger to be filled with God... you can almost see her thinking about what the shepherds have said... you can almost hear her gasp when she remembers what Gabriel said to her so many months ago... and pondering it all in her heart...

Minister Spong wrote... *The world on the whole... is happy to relegate the baby to a barn... to wooden figures arranged just so... to a seasonal observance named after him... but dominated by sweaters of questionable origin... decorated cookies... and the race to buy the video game or necklace or doll or skis that will fulfill the desires of the ones we seek to please... we may achieve surprise... she wrote... but do we find... awestruck tenderness...*

When we brought Rachel home from the hospital... our lives had changed for good... both permanently and for the better... there were quiet voices... there was dimmed lighting... there were fewer visitors while she bonded with her mother and me... our actions were driven by her needs... though sometimes we had to guess at what they were... our rhythms were driven by her rhythms... her sleep times became our sleep times... life became a matter not of quantity... but of quality... and like Mary... our hearts were changed...

The Emperor Augustus wanted a census... his heart had not changed... Augustus wanted to count people... he wanted to quantify his world... so he could tax it and control it... he could be called efficient... but he could not be called righteous...

But God brought Abraham outside and said... *look toward heaven and count the stars... if you are able to count them... then God said... so shall your descendants be...* Abraham couldn't quantify what God said... it was impossible to put a number on this promise... but Abraham believed the *quality* of God's promise... and God reckoned it to him as righteousness...

In this morning's reading from 2 Samuel... God asked David... *Are you going to build Me a house to live in... I have not lived in a house since the day I brought the people of Israel up from Egypt... but I will make you a house... I will live in you...*

This passage is similar to the one in Jeremiah... in which God says... *But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel... I will put my Law within them... I will write it on their hearts... and I will be their God... and they shall be my people...*

So what would happen... if we opened the door of our heart to God... and invited God in... if we focused more on quality and less on quantity... if we let life happen on its own terms... instead of trying to control it... what would happen if we believed the stories of outcasts like shepherds instead of scoffing at them and trying to make their stories fit into our worldview... what would happen if we treated strangers... with the awestruck tenderness... we treat our own children...

And how would it be... if the words of The Magnificat... which we chanted this morning... came into being... how would it be if we let an upside down baby like Jesus... who was really right side up... turn our world right side up too... the way God intended it to be... and change us for good... not just for the season... but for the whole year... that opportunity began at 5:12 this afternoon...

Merry Christmas!

Mike+