

The Mess of Incarnation

Luke 1:57-58, 2:4-7 by Patty Friesen Second Advent, Dec. 10/23

Slide 1 - Nine Moons by Leah Dorion - Advent means we enter a new gospel focus in the lectionary - this is Year B in Mark's gospel; who doesn't say a single word about the birth of Christ. The birth of Christ is not important to him. So for our purposes, I have chosen Luke's birth experiences of Elizabeth and Mary to remind us that in Christmas, God is with us in the most profound way possible - through human birth and nothing reflects Advent hope and waiting more profoundly than pregnancy.

This is Nine Moons by local Metis artist Leah Dorion, who is featured this month at the Sask Arts Council on Broadway. We are using this with her permission - in fact she was thrilled that her art would find its' way into a Mennonite church. Leah often paints women as the teachers of the next generation. I'm drawn to Nine Moons as circles reflecting the circle of the womb and the feminine pink circle of life. We'll call this woman Mary who is standing on Turtle Island and on the orange base of Every Child Matters.

The mess of incarnation means God put on flesh and blood and moved into the neighbourhood through birth, now showing us what it means to be truly human. God never shied away from our most piercingly human experiences - birth, pain, death, sickness - and so, we will find God and the ways of redemption there also. (Bessey, p. 120,121).

According to traditional Catholic teaching, Mary was a virgin who was born of a virgin Anna and Mary did not experience labour pains. Apparently, Jesus just popped out. The gospel writers seem thrilled with the gory details of Jesus' death but haven't a

clue about his birth. Of all the gospels, Luke, who was a physician, has the most interest in women's experience in first century Palestine but birth wasn't talked about back then. My guess is that Mary did have labour pains. For this to be the total human experience that God wanted to have in Jesus, there had to be labour pains.

Slide 2 - pregnant woman - Modern female Christian writers, writing from their birthing experiences find the powerful presence of God. Fathers and mothers alike experience God's love and joy in a profound way in the birth of their children. Dorothy Day, founder of the Catholic Worker Movement became a Christian after the birth of her daughter Theresa. Previously an atheist, she said, "After this experience, I have to believe in God."

In the words of Sarah Bessey, The whole story of birth - this creating out of passion and love, the carrying of an ever-increasing beloved burden, the seemingly never-ending waiting, the knitting together of wonder in secret places, the under the surface fear, the pain, the labour, the blurring of that line between joy and "someone please make it stop," the "I can't do it," even while locked in the midst of the doing, the delivery of new life in blood and hope and humanity - this is the stuff of God.

Bessey continues - There is something godly in the waiting, in the mystery, in the fact that we are a part of it - a partner with it but not the authors of it. You know that there is a new life coming, and the anticipation is sometimes exciting, other times exhausting and never ending. There is a price to pay for the privilege of life. I was fortunate to give birth to two of our three babies without complications. I find myself thinking of those experiences often; they were turning points in my life. My eldest daughter, Anne, was born in the hospital in a fairly usual way. My littlest girl, Evelyn

Joan, was born at home, in water with midwives attending us, and it was a beautiful and redemptive experience. But it's the birth of our son, Joseph Arthur, that stays with me. His was an unintended, unattended birth in our building's underground parking garage while we were on our way to the hospital. No, I'm not kidding.

After beginning labour at home, we progressed far faster than we could have anticipated after our eldest daughter's thirteen-hour labor. This was unprecedented for us, so Brian thought we had time to make it to the hospital just a few minutes away. I had four contractions on our way down the hall and in the elevator of our apartment building. My poor husband, Brian, half-carried, half-dragged me into the parking garage, now desperate for help. He leaned me up against a support pole and ran to the truck to pull it over to me.

We were on our own - no midwife, no doctor, not even in our own home with a clean floor. Instead, we were in a dirty garage filled with cars and the smell of gas and tires. My husband was scared; a lot of things could go wrong in this scenario, but he had the good sense to act like he was in control and knew what he was doing. We were surrounded by strangers - helpful, concerned strangers but strangers nonetheless-and they were witnessing me give birth. I can only be thankful that this was before everyone had a smartphone otherwise, it likely would have been live-tweeted on Twitter with the hashtag#OMG.

Obviously, none of this was in my carefully typed-out birth plan. My body had taken over, and all we could do was surrender to that moment fully. Every muscle in my body was focused; my entire world had narrowed to that very moment. Birth was

happening, and it was happening now - nothing else mattered. One kind woman bravely stepped forward to kneel at my feet, just in case.

Beside our old Chevy TrailBlazer, standing up, with Brian's' arms under my arms as a support, our son was born into my own hands, nearly nine pounds of shrieking boy-child humanity, welcomed by my hysterical laughter and his father's uncontrollable tears of relief. A few people applauded while they spoke to the 911 dispatcher.

I can assure you: there isn't anything very dignified about giving birth. And yet, that was the moment when I felt my carefully constructed line between the sacred and the secular shatter once and for all. The sacred and holy moments of a life are often our most raw, our most human moments, aren't they?

Slide 3 - woman with child at window - There are deep Christian metaphors of birth and surrender. But we keep the mess of the incarnation quiet - particularly at Christmas - because it's just not churchy enough. It's personal, private and there just aren't words for it - and it's a bit too much. It's too much pain, too much waiting, too much humanity, too much God, too much work, too much joy or sorrow, too much love and far too messy with too little control.

And sometimes it does not go the way we thought it was supposed to go, and then we are left with questions, with deep sadness, empty arms after all of the waiting - with sadness unto death for the longing of a life. My entire concept of God shifted through the experiences of pregnancy, pregnancy loss, birthing - all of it left me with what I now knew deep in the centre of my soul: God as Parent. I caught a glimpse behind the views of God's Mother-Father heart and I drank deeply. No theologian can take away what I know, what many mothers the world over know in their heart of hearts

about loss, sacrifice, pain and birth, raising babies to life, and real transformation: it is Love, and it is sacred in its very messy living out. (Sarah Bessey, *Jesus Feminist*, p. 117-119)

Slide 4 - father with child - God put on flesh and blood through birth showing us what it means to be truly human. There is power in telling the stories of how God broke through for each of us, including how God broke through for us in our birth stories. Tell someone your birth story today in church - it would make a very interesting conversation at the men's table at coffee. God incarnate, Word made flesh, born of a woman. Sure, it matters.

I'll close with this poem by an expectant father. *Waiting on a Heartbeat* by *Clint*

Smith:

The doctor says you are there
Even though we cannot hear you

And you know what they say about the tree
Falling in the forest

And I know I have never heard a tree
I could not see

But I have seen trees I could not hear
Little one

They tell me you are half the size of a fingernail
And when I hear that I look down at my cuticles

And imagine you sitting there
Telling me dad it's going to be okay

There is nothing
to worry about

There is joy in being
A father to a mystery

There is grace in observing the tulip
And knowing it will bud before your eyes

Little one
You are my daily reminder

That you do not go to a garden to watch
The flowers grow

You go to give thanks
For what has already bloomed.

Let us pray: #132 Sing the Story: God and maker of all, to redeem the world you chose human flesh and earthly parenting. With the joy that was Mary and Joseph's, may our souls magnify the Lord, and our bodies be the means through which you continue the mighty work of salvation for which Christ came. Amen.