

The Three Births
Psalm 139: 13-17
Luke 2: 6-14

This last Sunday before Christmas, the 4th Sunday of Advent, let's ponder the miracle of not one but *three* births. They tell us that every birth is a miraculous birth, and that life itself is a miracle.

I

The first birth is of course the birth of Jesus: Mary and Joseph arriving at the inn; the innkeeper saying his immortal line: "There's no room in the inn" then offering the shepherd's stable out back. Then in the night the birth of the Christ.

That he was born in a stable, a cow's feeding trough, a make-shift crib for a make-shift night, is the stuff of myths and miracles. This child was born for all! Not in a palace or a temple, in the precincts of power and institutional religion but out in the night, air sheltered on three sides, accompanied by a menagerie of animals, a cow, a donkey, a sheep dog, a sheep or two. Soon shepherds, they of the lower classes of that society, would scramble to see him after the angels had filled the night sky with glory.

All births are miraculous, but this one we honor as the miracle of miracles. Born of a virgin, the scriptures and creeds say. It's too bad that the theologians and religious leaders have made the virgin birth a place of contention, a doctrine

which divides the true believers from the half-believers. The virgin birth is one of the five points of Fundamentalism. If you don't believe that the whole faith crumbles, they say. I'd say the whole faith rests of something else: the love of God and neighbor. Jesus said something like that.

The birth of Jesus is a place for wonder, not theological wrangling or spiritual one-up-manship. The early theologian of the eastern church, Gregory of Nyssa wrote: "Concepts create idols; only wonder comprehends!..." Only wonder can comprehend the holy birth of Christ. In one of her best known works, Madeleine L'Engle who wrote among other things, *A Wrinkle in Time*, writes of this holy season:

This is the irrational season
 When love blooms bright and wild
 Had Mary been filled with reason
 There'd been no room for a child.

Would you let love bloom bright and wild today, and make room for the child?

Mary, nine months earlier, had received the call of calls. Denise Levertov captures the momentousness of it:

...to bear in her womb
 infinite weight and lightness; to carry

in hidden, finite inwardness,
nine months of Eternity; to contain
in slender vase of being,
the sum of power—
in narrow flesh,
the sum of light.
Then bring to birth,
push out into air, a Man-child
needing, like any other
milk and love—
but who was God....¹

There on the night of nights he was born behind the inn in Bethlehem, a tiny town on the edge of the Roman empire. It boggles the mind into wonder.

II

Now to the second birth, the miracle of our own births. We are here, a miracle of life, our own births, miraculous births. We too are mud and spark, body and spirit, human flesh and breath of God!

Our psalmist sings of the miracle of our conception, forming and birth:

It was you, O God,
who formed my inward parts,
who knit me together in my mother's womb.

I praise you for I am
awesomely and wonderfully made.

My frame was not hidden from you
when I was made in secret
intricately woven in the depths of the earth

How mysterious to me your thoughts,
the sum of them cannot be numbered.

Do you think of your birth as a miraculous birth? The awesome and wondrous act of God? Can you imagine the love and delight of God at your birth? The one who blessed you and called you good? This is how God welcomes your birth. Brene Brown says we go around "hustling for our worthiness." Your worthiness is your birthright.

Hear Joan Baez' words:

You are amazing grace

You are a precious jewel

You—special, miraculous unrepeatable

Fragile, fearful, tender, lost

Sparkling ruby emerald

Jewel rainbow splendor

Person.

This is who you are, this is how God sees you.

III

Now to the third birth. In God's wonder-working imagination God has more in store for us than Christ's birth and our birth. It is Christ's birth in us.

Paul expressed it this way. He is talking in Galatians about his great spiritual yearning for the church. "My little children", he wrote, "I am in the pain of childbirth until Christ is formed in you (Galatians 4:19)."

The third miracle birth, Christ being born in us. As he is formed in us, we are being formed into his likeness. "How can this be?", we ask with Mary. Paul writes in II Corinthians

And we all...beholding the glory of the Lord, are being changed into his likeness from one degree of glory to another (II Corinthians 3:18).

We become what we behold. So Christ is born in us as we behold him and keep beholding him. Eastern Orthodox Christianity says that we become like Christ as we behold the Christ, gaze upon him. That is why icons are so much a part of

their spirituality and worship. As we behold the beauty of the Lord, we are transformed in his beauty. “How can this be?”, we ask with Mary.

We let Christ be born in us as we declutter our souls and become empty to hold him! As we become womb-like as Mary who bore him in her womb.

To let Christ be formed in us comes as we let Christ’s words abide in us and we abide in them, as we let them take up residence in us. You may have seen the dinner scene in the NASCAR comedy *Talladega Nights*. Ricky Bobby, played by Will Farrell is saying the blessing over the big family meal. He prays, “Dear Lord Baby Jesus.” It sets off a hilarious discussion of how they thought about Jesus. Farrell said he liked his sweet Lord baby Jesus the best. Well, we need to be formed by the words of the “grow’d up” Jesus, to use Southern vernacular, to let Christ be formed in us.

Christ is formed in us, we *belove* him. The English word believe comes from the German word to belove. To believe in the Christ-child the season is to belove him and be formed by that love. One of Charles Wesley’s most loved hymns is in fact a Christmas hymn, perfect for this day.

Love divine, all loves excelling,
joy of heaven, to earth come down;
fix in us thy humble dwelling;

all thy faithful mercies crown!
Jesus, thou art all compassion,
pure unbounded love thou art;
visit us with Thy salvation;
enter every trembling heart.

The British poet of years ago, Robert Herrick, wrote these words which have been set in anthem form by Randall Thompson:

Christ, he requireth still,
wheresoe'er he comes,
to feed or lodge to have the best of rooms;
Give him the choice; grant him the nobler part
Of all the house; the best of all's the heart.

Would you offer this best of rooms to him today?