

Sermon TUMC, December 20, 2015 – Advent IV – Birth stories

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John 1: 1-14; 1 John 4: 7-16; Luke 1: 39-56

This week I've been "haunted" (inspired, pursued) by a question, which I will share with you as well.

"What of Christ is waiting to be born in me?"¹

Ask it to yourself.

When I put these scripture texts together (one of them is lectionary, the others are not) I was going for something else. I was going for a scripture about Love because our theme is indifference to love. And I was going for a scripture about light and darkness because someone (you know who you are ☺) challenged the light and darkness theme. But as it often happens, scripture did its own thing and I realized the every single one of the texts is about birth. (Each text is a sermon unto itself and I encourage you to re-read the passages)

So I ask you again: **What of Christ is waiting to be born?**

We've reached the fourth Sunday of Advent. We have had these beautiful banners that turn from side to side. We went from Despair to Hope, from Chaos to Peace from Fear to Joy and now Indifference to Love.

We had a conversation about what we were going to put on the opposite side of Love and we came up with indifference. When I think about indifference I think of some frustrating times raising teenagers, where you get a single word that encapsulates it: Whatever! In other words, what you care about does not matter to me.

Indifference:

- The shrug of the shoulders – "Whatever"
- The eyes glaze over, staring at a screen.
- That driver that cuts you off, doesn't even care that they nearly ran you over, because they really don't give a bleep.
- Indifference, the spiritual morphine that numbs the pain when life becomes too challenging and when engagement with others is too difficult. There is a reason why indifference is so tempting.
- Or indifference to the pain of others, because it's just really hard. Caring hurts. Love hurts (to quote somebody). It requires pain.

¹ I'm indebted to my Spiritual Director, Alexandra for posing this question.

I am going to propose to you today that it requires *birth pains*.

When we talk about Advent and about expecting, what exactly are we expecting?

I got new tires, they were my Christmas gift to myself (#adultChristmasisnofun). Expecting presents, that really is not what Advent it about either.

So what are we expecting? **What of Christ is waiting to be born in you?**

Let's look at this pregnancy theme. (The thing about pregnancy is that there is no turning back, when you're going to have a baby you're going to have a baby and it's going to hurt.)

First lets take a detour into the John text.

JOHN

Today is Winter solstice: longest dark night of the year. It also means that tomorrow is not going to be as long! It's turning, like our banners, turning from darkness to light. And so we expect light.

Maybe we expect a solstice for our souls or our spirits, something that turns us towards light.

There is a Taizé song that says: "When the night becomes dark, your love oh Lord is a flame."

There are gifts that the darkness brings us so we don't have to rush to turn on the lights in our life. I came across from Jan Richardson² that says this very well.

But first a definition: Incarnation means God taking on flesh, God becoming human, we're talking about Jesus.

"Darkness is where incarnation [God as human] begins. The gorgeous texts of Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany shimmer with the light that God brings into our midst, as in the prologue to John's Gospel: *The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it* (John 1:5). Yet if we lean too quickly toward the light, we miss seeing one of the greatest gifts this season has to offer us: that the deepest darkness is the place where God comes to us. In the womb, in the night, in the dreaming; when we are lost, when our world has come undone, when we cannot see the next step on the path; in all the darkness that attends our life, whether hopeful darkness or horrendous, God meets us. God's first priority is not to do away with the

² <http://adventdoor.com/2015/12/17/this-luminous-darkness-searching-for-solace-in-advent-and-christmas/>

dark but to be present to us in it. ... For the Christ who was born two millennia ago, for the Christ who seeks to be born in us this day, the darkness is where incarnation begins.”

“What of Christ is waiting to be born in you?”

LUKE

We often note that in Mary’s song she sings about turning things around and upside down. The powerful are brought down and the lowly are lifted up, the hungry are fed and the filled are sent away. She’s singing about her hopes of her people to be rescued from their own lowliness at the bottom of the political food chain. But lets not forget that this is the story of two pregnant women.

In the realm of pregnancy, when the baby in the womb turns upside down, that means it’s getting ready to be birthed. Mary is singing about things turning upside down.

Are there any upside down places in your life right now? Maybe, they are the pregnant places.

“What of Christ is waiting to be born?”

Sometimes, because the sons that are born to these two women are so amazing (John and Jesus), I think we miss some details about this particular bit of the story. And because I am an older woman, and because I have had a lot of dealings with pregnancy and all that can go right or wrong with it, I see things.

Let’s think about Elizabeth. When she dared hope that she was pregnant, she didn’t send out birth announcements. There is a verse we never read which says she went into seclusion for five months (Luke 1:24). She was not quite sure how it was going to turn out, best to be careful. When you’re older, or have been infertile for a long time (and even at the best of times) bringing newness is dangerous and can be complicated. There are no guarantees, only hope.

She did have faith in God, deep down. But what if she had gotten it wrong and people made fun of her - again? What if she had another miscarriage? It had happened before. Another loss. Another round of hoping for something, and then it doesn’t happen and it ends in pain.

What would she say to everyone? Best to keep it quiet and see how things would turn out. It’s a tentative hope. You really want to believe, the signs are pointing to hope, but... best keep it to yourself.

Then in the *sixth* month an angel goes and sees Mary and tells her that she is going to have a baby as well. And Mary goes to her cousin and they try to learn from each

other. The young one full of wonder and hope, and the old one with “let’s just wait and see.”

When Mary comes, in Elizabeth’s sixth month, Elizabeth feels the baby move. That is often when people feel a baby move for the first time. It took someone else to confirm her experience for her to feel what was moving and growing inside of her. So she could get to the point of “This is really going to happen this time. God promised and I am going to be able to live out that promise. God *has* been faithful after all!”

So you see, we need each other, just as they needed each other. Faith, if it has any substance, also always casts a shadow.

If you are Elizabeth, what does it feel like to be in a time of waiting on God to follow through on something? Where is it that you need healing from your past experiences so that you can move into hope?

“What of Christ is waiting to be born in you?”

I JOHN

It was really hard to think about what to say about Love because poets have been trying to do it for so long. Poetry really is the best mode to talk about Love. Walter Brueggemann says that being a person of faith is like being poetry in a world of prose (or something like that).

There is another birth that we know about in the Bible, which is Nicodemus. Nicodemus went to Jesus and he was told that he needed to be born again, born of the Spirit. Sadly, this beautiful image has been abused and misused in our culture. But the truth of it is still there. We are being invited to be reborn, born of God.

“Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is *born* of God and knows God. God is Love.”

What of Christ is waiting to be born in you?

Expectation is great, but with expectation comes delivery. Delivery means that things get turned upside down, and that there is some degree of pain and some degree of active pushing. Where is Spirit pushing in your life right now? Where are you being asked to push, to move out of indifference and to actively demonstrate Love?

What of Christ is waiting to be born in you?