

## Giving Birth to God: the Gift of Love

Luke 1: 26-38, 47-55

Jesus was born. We don't know exactly where. We don't know exactly when. It seems pretty clear that Mary was Jesus' mother. That tradition is very strong. We are not quite as sure about Joseph and there does not seem to be any real consensus as to who else was there.

The New Testament has quite a variety of references to, and accounts of, the birth of Jesus. The earliest chronologically is that of Paul. He writes that Jesus was "born of a woman," implying that his birth took place, as far as anyone knew, in the usual way. There does not appear to be any tradition of a supernatural birth story within the first two generations after Jesus.

The next earliest account in the New Testament is from the Gospel of Mark, and that is really no *account* at all. Mark gives no reference to Jesus' birth, but starts with a declaration that Jesus is the "Son of God". He then moves into an account of the grown Jesus beginning his ministry. Subsequently, Jesus is called, "the carpenter, the son of Mary" (6:3), suggesting that the identity of Jesus' father was not known.

Around the time of the completion of Mark's gospel, a life-changing event occurred for all Jewish people: the destruction of the Jerusalem temple by the Romans in the year 70CE. As a result of this cataclysmic event, the face and relationship of Judaism and Christianity were forever changed.

Matthew, writing after the destruction of the temple, begins the tradition of supernatural birth stories by introducing the idea of a virgin birth. To do this, he interprets Isaiah 7:14 in a new way. The original Hebrew version reads, "a young girl will conceive and bear a son". The Hebrew word means *maiden* or *young girl*. This text refers to a time in the eighth century BCE, during Isaiah's lifetime, when Jerusalem was under siege by the Assyrian army. The text is meant to be a sign of hope that Jerusalem and the monarchy would survive with a new heir whose name will be called *Immanuel*.

Matthew spoke and read Greek. His version of the Hebrew Bible was the Greek translation known as the *Septuagint*. The Greek word in this verse can mean either young girl or virgin. Writing from the perspective of a post 70CE world, and as a believer in the divine nature of the risen Christ, Matthew sees in this passage a sign of the Holy Spirit's paternity of Jesus.

The virgin birth tradition begins with Matthew's gospel. The coming of the Wise Men from the East, the role of Joseph and his dreams, and the revenge of King Herod are other aspects unique to Matthew's gospel.

Luke's gospel appeared a few years after Matthew's and expands the birth narrative significantly. The writer of this gospel uses images from the *Septuagint* (Old Testament). He accepts Matthew's tradition of a virgin birth, but does not have any Wise Men, a flight to Egypt, or the slaughter of innocents by Herod.

Luke's birth story has John (later called The Baptist) born to Elizabeth and Zechariah. Also, Elizabeth and Mary, Jesus' mother, are relatives. Zechariah has a vision that leaves him literally dumbstruck. Later Zechariah, then Simeon and Anna,

testify to Jesus' coming. Another Luke exclusive is the Roman census. It serves to get Mary and Joseph from Nazareth to Bethlehem. Luke has shepherds in the fields of Bethlehem and a manger in a stable. Also, only Luke's gospel has a multitude of angels singing, "Glory to God in the highest".

There are several different versions of the birth of Jesus. The familiar Christmas stories are rather late in coming to the Christian tradition. They don't really fit together as a single story. Yet, as we observe Christmas, we still find a great deal of meaning in the familiar manger scene with Luke's stable, shepherds, and angels alongside Matthew's Wise Men. This speaks to us of the deep truth of our faith in Christ that does not depend on historical accuracy or any single account of events, but is shaped by tradition and enlivened by the very real presence of the living Christ in our lives.

Why did these stories about Jesus' birth develop as they did within the Christian tradition? There are a couple of compelling reasons. The early Christians were Jewish in background and these stories represent an attempt to re-read the Hebrew scriptures in terms of their experience of Jesus. As the wall between Judaism and Christianity grew, especially after the fateful year 70CE, the stories bolstered the Christian assertion that Jesus was the Messiah and the Son of God. (from *Liberating the Gospels* by John Shelby Spong)

Jesus was a child of obscurity, born to a peasant woman. In his life, many people saw the face of God. After his death, many more people came to understand that divine presence as a reality on which they would stake their very lives. The tradition that comes down to us is that Jesus revealed the very nature of God through his own life and death, and that his spiritual presence continues to reveal God to us today. In this sense, then, we can say that Mary, the peasant girl, gave birth to God. She is our model, our example, as in our lives we, too, seek to give birth to God.

Giving birth is the theme of today's scripture account from Luke's gospel. Elizabeth gave birth to John and Mary to Jesus. Many Christian mystics over the years have expressed the view that each of us needs to "give birth" to God in our lives just as Mary gave birth to Christ in hers, and just as God gives birth to creation, including us, all the time.

How can we give birth to God in our lives? What does this look like? I was walking around the Plaza yesterday with all the other Christmas shoppers. The Salvation Army bell ringers were out in force and I felt a twinge of guilt each time I walked by one of their kettles without giving money. I kept reminding myself that we were already giving to the church and to its building campaign, to the Heifer project, and to Bread for the World. Nevertheless, there was some guilt. Living in that tension of giving and feeling guilty by not giving is part of the labor pains of giving birth to God in our lives.

While I was walking, there was one corner with a guy handing out Christian tracts and another guy wearing a sign that said, "Fear God: Obey His Commandment!" The implication was "obey or else!" The sign bearer was arguing with two young women about something written in the Bible and some aspect of the man's belief. He was trying to tell them how they were supposed to believe in order to please God.

While I was standing there, waiting for the light to change, I realized that all those people were trying to give birth to God in their lives – trying to find some depth of meaning in their faith, especially during this holiday season.

That particular approach to releasing God’s life in mine doesn’t work for me. Trying to convince people of what they ought to believe or warning them about the consequences of believing the wrong thing not only does not facilitate the birthing process, it distracts from it. The question, however, still confronts us: “What are we bringing to life in our attempt to give birth to God?”

You and I are in God every bit as much as God is in us – maybe more. Giving birth to God is a graphic image describing the process of letting God, who is all around us, between us and within us, become more visible through us. The image of giving birth means that the Spirit, already in each of us, is becoming more visible in our lives as we are becoming more transparent.

How do you do that? How do you become more transparent and allow the Spirit to become more visible in your life? The ironic answer is that we become more transparent by become more, not less, ourselves. That happens by deepening the inward journey, by practicing the presence of God and becoming more mindful in our daily living.

You also give birth to God by clarifying and broadening the outward journey: discovering the possibilities of your life. Most of us limit ourselves out of fear or self-doubt, or maybe by being distracted. We give birth to God by realizing the possibilities of our lives.

Christmas is about nothing less than giving birth to your own potential. As a Christian congregation, this is what we mean by finding our identity and direction. Crossroads Church is moving along that path. The work we have done in the past year and the decisions we are in the process of making will enable us to see our possibilities and act on them. We are giving birth to God.

We cannot go farther or grow faster as a congregation than we as individuals are willing to go and grow. You and I have lots of potential in our lives. We call it gifts. We call it talents and passion. It is a calling – God’s invitation to each one of us to become more deeply ourselves.

Mary was able to say “be it to me according to Thy will” – an unequivocal “yes” to the potential of her life in God. No less is needed for you and me. What are the big questions you are facing in your life? What may be holding you back from an unequivocal “Yes” to God? Is there a life-changing action you need to take or continue taking? Say “yes” to your potential and you’ll discover that God is being born in your life. When God is born in us, then God can be born in our community and then in our society.

O God, for whom we long  
as a woman in labor  
longs for her delivery;  
give us courage to wait,  
strength to push,

and discernment to know the right time;  
that we may each bring into the world  
the child you have given us to bear,  
through Jesus Christ. Amen.  
(Janet Morley, *All Desires Known*)