

Christmas Eve 2018

The thing about a baby is that it's undeniably real. It's unnerving how few things are these days. Actually, we seem to get really unnerved when things *are* real.

The other day there was a series of weather advisories—three simultaneous weather advisories. The NOAA weather website was lit up in yellows and oranges. Heavy rain. Thunderstorms. Some other thing. My son Tobias asked me the forecast so he could dress right for school, and I warned him of all the advisories. “Heavy rain. Rain is when water falls out of the sky. It just falls everywhere—and you could get wet! And also, this water (which, mind you, is still falling) could puddle up on the ground, and if you step in one of these puddles, your feet could get wet. So be advised! Also, there could be thunder. And that can be very noisy! So be advised.”

“Okay, Mom,” he said, interrupting me. He was well enough advised, it would seem. “I got it,” he said, knowing well my snarky habits of mind.

Of all the real things I've ever been a part of, though—getting wet in rainstorms and hiking mountains and singing in choirs, being a little sister and a big rower and a pastor in this tiny church where I just, apparently, am going to stay forever and where it will therefore become evermore real with each passing year—there's been nothing as real for me as pregnancy and birth.

Luke seems taken by this as well—Luke, the gospel writer whom we'll follow this church year, the gospel writer who has the most of all four gospel writers to say about the Mary's pregnancy and Jesus' birth.

It can land you in some embarrassing places—like yesterday in church when we heard about young Mary, then pregnant with Jesus, visiting her kinswoman, old Elizabeth, then pregnant with John. Such an embodied encounter, it had us imagining bodies doing what no willpower could make them do but which they were doing because that's what they're made to do; *women's* bodies, burgeoning with fluid and flesh, bone and brain, all brought to a place then of unimaginable pain.

And we decided once again (we in church, as we always do when presented with this most astounding story) that, whether or not all this happened in just this way, this visit between these two women involved in two unlikely pregnancies and readying themselves for two births that, like every birth, could go any which way, and either to happy or to grave consequence, or to both happy *and* grave consequence: this is so strangely, astonishingly, real.

Which seems to be the point Luke most of all wants to make. Really, from the conception of Jesus to the crucifixion of Jesus to the resurrection of Jesus and the activation of the church, Luke's greatest hope as a writer seems to be that his hearers feel the utter realness of it all.

And not because of some latent worry that it might otherwise be a story cast aside as "just a story." No, I don't think Luke was writing from a defensive crouch—as if, since writing a "religious" story, he'd assume a need to defend it. No, no, no: Luke's insistence upon the reality of the story he had to tell wasn't to defend against future skepticism and scientism. His insistence on its reality was rather to challenge the ever-present human desire to escape.

To escape! Because the story Luke had to tell, like the composite story we heard just now, again this year yet perhaps also anew, wouldn't be a means to escape the real, as so many mythologies have always been, either themselves a way of escaping into a fantasy land at least for a time or as an expression of some hope that there might be escape, *deus ex machine* coming in to save the day. ("It's a bird! It's a plane!" "Stop the world! I want to get off!" "My hero.") No, *this* story of a baby and a young mother and a kind father and a rude birth and a stupid, brutal ruler and its appeal even to outsiders come from afar; and then of a young man who'd stop at nothing to impress upon the world the power of love, the imperative to love, the assurance that amidst the sharp and painful realities of reality the only means of salvation *is love*: this story wouldn't be a means to escape the real, it would be a means to access the real.

Worse, it would be a demand of the real.

Worse because who *doesn't* want to escape? Who couldn't use some relief from reality's pressing upon us its urgency, its significance, even its disappointing tedium? Who doesn't want a night at the movies or a week at a spa or a month in the Hamptons or just a daily dose of something to take the edge off, or perhaps to sharpen an edge that has gone sort of dull? (Weren't you edgy once? I once had a motorcycle, and steel-toed boots!) Because I know, I know: reality can be tough. I know even within this small congregation, even limited to the last couple of weeks, as wondrous as it can all be, as astonishing as it all is, it's also rough, a rending of the heart.

But that too—that too is its loveliness.

The birth of Christ invites us into such astonishment at life's loveliness, presses upon us the distressing awareness that it could all go suddenly wrong, pushes us to the edge of all we can

muster: the awe, the hope, the fear, the wonder. And by this, God calls us—the mewling cry of a newborn, which makes all else secondary to the demand of succor and love.

It's a sweet, exquisite sound.

It's a terrifying, haunting sound because you think you'll never have another moment's rest, another moment's peace. It pulls you from sleep, and you hate to hear it, and you're relieved to hear it because it means all is well with this but seedling whose power of insistence will mean its continued thriving. Yet it means also that there's some trouble and it's yours to address, it is *ours* to address.

There is some trouble, and it is ours to address.

We are each of us, yes, a child of God. Tonight, we are also the mother of God, and there's some trouble out there, and it comes to us to take it on.

Out there, beyond these walls, we have work to do.

Thank God it is the work of love.

Let us pray.