

## **TOØ MESSY / “A Messy Christmas”**

### **Sermon 4: “A Messy Birth”**

**December 20, 2015**

I think I had better give you parents a warning before I get going. Some of you guys may consider my sermon this morning PG, or even PG 13. I'm going to be talking about birth. So if you'd rather, we have some great classes for our pre-schoolers down the hall, and our elementary school kids have some great programs downstairs. Your call.

Now, I was the smallest baby in our family. I was only 8lbs 9ozs. My sister was 8-14. My younger brother was 11-2, and my littlest brother, Jim, was 11lbs 11ozs. Now that's just cruel, isn't it? You'd think Jim was the most inconsiderate of mom's babies, but I was actually her most painful, even though I was the smallest. You see, I came out breech. Instead of coming out head-first, I came out mooning the world (which probably explains a lot about my attitude, doesn't it?)

Well, apparently that was a painful birth for both of us. The trauma of that birth actually damaged the muscles in my neck – there was so much pressure, and so much twisting. I ended up having to have surgery to fix it when I was about 5. But it was especially hard for mom. I guess she couldn't have a lot of the pain meds, because they would have put me at risk. So she just ... took the pain. And even after all that, she pretty much thought I was perfect. I had her fooled.

Now, this is the last sermon in a little series we are calling “Messy Christmas.” And we are going to wrap it up by exploring this question: Why would God choose to enter our world in such an amazingly messy way? Guys, birth is flat out painful, and messy! How many of you guys have watched an animal give birth? A dog, a cat, a cow? I grew up for a while on a dairy farm. So I've pulled calves. It is ... messy. How many of you guys have been there for a human birth? I've heard some people call it beautiful. I don't think so. There's so much pain; there is so much that could go wrong; there's so much mess. Now listen, God could have entered our world any way he chose. Why did he choose birth?

And did you know that human babies are one of the most fragile of all creatures? Calves and colts are up walking around in a few hours;

puppies and kittens in a few weeks. Human babies ... it takes nearly a year. Babies can't move themselves, they can't feed themselves, they can't protect themselves; they are nearly helpless, total dependent. So, why would God – who is anything but helpless, and anything but dependent – why would God present himself to us in a form that is about as un-godlike as we can imagine?

Now most of you guys know that Randy and I prepare our sermons together. Randy is the pastor of the First Capital Christian Church in Corydon, Indiana, and the two of us have been friends and colleagues for about 30 years. He's the creative one, I'm the pretty one. Some time back I got to meet Brenda Billner. Brenda is part of the church family at First Capital. She's been an OB nurse for 25 years – so she's been at 1000s of births. But she also works with a fantastic mission organization called *Teach to Transform*. They do great work! Brenda goes with their teams to 3<sup>rd</sup> world countries and teaches pastors and midwives how to deliver babies. She teaches them how to recognize and what to do when a baby is in danger, how to help and take care of the mother ... and other critical stuff that can save the life of both mother and child.

Well, Brenda is going to help us this morning. She's not here physically, but Randy interviewed her, looking for some stuff that will make the Christmas story a bit more real for us. Here is Randy talking with Brenda. Now they are going to start out talking about birth in general, and birth here in America – a "1<sup>st</sup> world" birth.

## VIDEO 1

Some of that stuff you can project back 2000 years, to a birth in a podunk little village like Bethlehem. But not all of it. And the "not all of it" parts make a world of difference.

Luke, who happened to be a doctor, describes the birth of Jesus like this. He writes, "So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in (the region of) Galilee to (the region of) Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary (they were being forced to register for taxes. Anyway, Mary was), who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child (so she's unmarried, and pregnant). While they were there (in

Bethlehem), the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in (strips of) cloths (they did that back then; they are called “swaddling clothes.” Then she) and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them. (Luke 2.4-7)

Now it didn't happen quite as we picture it in our Christmas cards, and Christmas carols. This was a different time, a different world – more akin to our 3<sup>rd</sup> world.

- The village of Bethlehem was about 100 miles south of Nazareth. No planes, no cars. How many of you ladies would like to hike 100 miles at 9 months pregnant? Sometimes Mary is pictured on a donkey. Probably not. And even if she did have access to a donkey, I'm not sure riding 100 miles on a donkey at 9 months pregnant is much better than walking.
- Luke says, “While they were there,” while they were in Bethlehem, she went into labor. Now sometimes we get this image of Mary riding into town with the contractions already 4 or 5 minutes apart, ready to get it done. Probably not. It looks like the labor started after they'd been in town for a while – it doesn't say how long.
- And Luke says, “They placed him (the baby) in a manger (in a feeding trough), because there was no guest room available for them. Now most people picture Mary and Joseph arriving in town late at night, in labor, and every motel is full with “No Vacancy” signs out. The problem is, they had a word for a hotel, and that's not the word Luke uses. The word he uses usually means a “guest room,” a room they would provide to their guests. In most of their houses there was a space for the family, and maybe a space for their guests, and then usually a space for their animals. They would bring their animals into their houses at night for safety, and for warmth, and for their fragrant aroma. And somewhere in that space – in the animal space -- there would be a feeding trough – a manger ... a bed ... for Jesus.
- Now the reason that Joseph and Mary were in the animal quarters is probably quite simple. Even though Bethlehem was tiny little place, it still was the town where King David had been born 1000 years

before. And since the government was forcing people to return to their “hometowns” to register for taxes, everyone who was an ancestor of David was flocking into town. The place was packed. So the animal quarters were probably the best space they had available.

- One more thing: back then every little village probably had a midwife – a doula – who’d help deliver the baby. The menfolk were probably pushed out, the womenfolk probably pitched in, and then ...

Well, listen to Brenda as she describes the difference between a 1<sup>st</sup> world birth, and a 3<sup>rd</sup> world birth.

## VIDEO 2

So Jesus lay there helpless. At some point they cut the cord that has kept him alive. He was probably hungry, he was probably cold, he was incredibly vulnerable. Is there any image less like God? A God that fragile, that helpless, that dependent?

It’s such a stunningly weird scene, how our God, our Creator, our Savior, entered our world. When Mary went into labor, they probably moved her to some “stall” to contain the mess of childbirth. The midwife would come, the men would be pushed outside, and the women would do whatever doting moms would do. When Jesus was born his extremities were wrapped in strips of cloths to stabilize him and to give him warmth, and then they placed him in his crib ... a feeding trough.

Could you imagine anything more un-godlike? So fragile; probably way more “precious” than beautiful; completely dependent on a teenage peasant to cover his nakedness, to protect him, to clean his wastes, to nurse his hunger. It would seem absolutely ludicrous to think that this (baby) was responsible for that (universe). It would seem ridiculous to think that this (baby) is the Lord and Savior of all that. Come on! Do you get the wonder of Christmas?

Why would God choose to enter our world at all? That’s a sobering question all in itself. But ... why did he choose to enter this world this way? That’s mind boggling! Angels don’t enter our worlds through a birth canal! They just pop into our story from time to time, fully mature,

powerful, ready to act. Don't you think the Son of God could have chosen a little less messy way to make his entrance? Why would his path be through the birth canal of a frightened teenager? Could God ever look any less like God? Naked ... gasping for breath ... unable to control his bowels ... bruised and bloody ... limp ... arms flailing ... ..

Well actually, there may have been one other time when Jesus looked even less like God. He was naked ... he was gasping for breath ... unable to control his bowels ... bruised and bloody ... arms outstretched ... and then limp ... and lifeless ... it seemed. Can you imagine any picture less ... godlike? ... ..

And yet ... I don't think there are any two moments in the life of Jesus that teach us more about the heart of God, and about what his dream is for us. I mean, of all the miracles Jesus worked, of all the sermons he preached – what could possibly tell us more about who God is, and what he is like, and what he desires than these two scenes. He was willing to enter our mess as a baby – he loved us that much. And he did it so he could end his life on a cross – he loved us that much... That's the Christmas story.

The apostle Paul put it like this: "Though he was God, he did not think of equality with God as something to cling to. (no kidding!) Instead, he gave up his divine privileges (no kidding!); he took the humble position of a slave and was born as a human being (go figure!). When he appeared in human form, he humbled himself in obedience to God and died a criminal's death on a cross (holy cow!). Therefore, God elevated him to the place of highest honor (and we do too!) and gave him the name above all other names, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth (and if they don't now, someday they will!), and every tongue declare that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. "Which is why we are here this morning – to give him the honor and the praise he deserves.

Prayer ...

*Song: "He has come for you"*

He came ... It blows our mind that the Lord of all Creation came into creation as the most fragile of creatures, to live with us, to die for us, to win

for us peace with God and hope forever. God was willing to endure a messy birth and a messy death, both for the same reason: to say, “I will go to this outrageous extreme to offer you the gift of eternal life.” And he can do that ...

- He’s God—It’s His gift to give.
- He’s God—He can determine how best to meet us.
- He’s God—Could he give us a more powerful proof of his love than this?

We are going to offer you several ways to respond to God right now...

- Lord’s Supper
- Offering
- Prayer
- Jesus as Savior
- CCCC as home