Tonight we celebrate the birth of Jesus. We hear, once again, his birth story. I don’t know about you, but at least once a month there is a news headline where a baby was born on the side of the beltway, in a metro station or some other location that is not a hospital and more than likely a police officer, first responder or complete stranger is hailed a hero for helping the mom deliver a baby.

Birth stories are often shared between girlfriends and family members. Things like how long was the labor, how painful were the contractions... did anybody faint, and what was it like to hold the baby for the first time.

Each birth and birth story is different and if you’ve ever waited anxiously for the news of the birth of your child, grandchild, niece or nephew or best friend’s baby you know that the time of waiting for news is mixed with joy and hope and anxiety that nothing will go wrong, that baby and mom will be ok without serious health problems or intervention. With birth come varying emotions of joy and fear, hope and nervousness for the birth and the new life that is struggling to join this world.

And, then, too, there are the birth stories that are bittersweet, as it was for my parents when my twin and I were born.

2.5 months premature and my twin died because he was too small. And with birth stories, there are other pains, too... the pain of a miscarriage, the pain of infertility and treatment. Each devastating and challenging to bear.

In Jesus’ birth story, we hear of Mary, young, betrothed and pregnant, and we hear of Joseph going to Bethlehem to register them in the census accounting that the Emperor is requiring.

It is time for the baby to be born. And, he is. Successfully.

And there, amidst the warm breath of the cows, camels and sheep, amidst the smells of the stable, the baby is wrapped in clothes and laid in a manger so the exhausted mother can get some rest. These are the birth story details passed down for generations. But, there were no news headlines like: “Very Pregnant Mother rides a Donkey to the Inn, Just In Time”

But the news was brought by angels to the shepherds in the fields. “Do not be afraid; for see I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David, a Savior,

who is the Messiah, the Lord.”

This baby, born in the city of David, a Savior, who is our Messiah, the Lord, will change the world. It’s hard enough to give birth to a child, let alone, birth a whole new world. But that’s what God intends through the One who became flesh and lived among us.

This baby whose birth we celebrate grew up to be a healer and a teacher. He was kind and welcoming to the neglected and marginalized. He prayed and taught us how to pray. And, even as we celebrate his birth and sing of a baby lying in a manger, we know that the manger was already standing in the shadow of the cross... this gift – a baby - that was such a threat to the world that humankind was not ready to receive it.

And so this day we wait still, again, longing for the return of the One who in his life among us gathered friends to carry on God’s work of birthing a new world. They have transmitted this work to us.

To do our work, we may, like laboring to birth a baby, get a little sweaty building homes or wells or packing food in the food pantry for those who don’t have enough.

We may get a little disoriented and exhausted by the

focus it takes to enact broad-reaching changes and impacts for justice.

We may cry for mercy at the pain of losing loved ones to disease As we support the search for medicines and miracles.

And while we labor for a new world, in the midst of the world we have, we look for the simple signs of Jesus our Emmanuel, already with us and in us.

God present in each child that is born and is cared for here and around the world as God’s precious gift of life.

God present in the animals that give us comfort and those that work for and with us – cats and dogs, cows and camels and let us care for them as God’s creation.

God present in the love that sustains a couple through devastating brain cancer or infertility.

In the birth of a baby, let us find joy, hope and promise and let us prepare to receive a new and different world. Amen.