

Jon Hauerwas – December 24, 2016 – Jesus’ Birth from Mary’s Perspective
Isaiah 9:2,6-7 and Luke 2:1-14

What was Mary thinking as she prepared to give birth to Jesus? Because I will never know, I direct my attention on this Christmas Eve to the wisdom of other mothers – those who have experienced this process themselves. Carol Howard Merritt is a minister and author who has served churches in Louisiana, Rhode Island, and Washington, D.C.

Reflecting on her first ordained pastorate in the swamps of Cajun country, Merritt writes, “standing in front of the communion table, I felt like a very young woman. I am short, and I swam in my preaching robe and the tassels on the end of my stole dragged the ground... After a couple of years” there, Merritt continues, “I became pregnant and was terrified to tell the congregation. I, personally, had never seen a pregnant pastor. I had only read about one in a John Irving novel.”¹

But, “during Advent,” she recalls, “we turned to Mary’s story. She was a poor young woman who found herself pregnant. A messenger came and gave her two important pieces of information: she would bear the son of God, and her cousin Elizabeth was also pregnant, even though she was too old to be giving birth. Nothing

¹ Carol Howard Merritt, “Pregnant with Hope: Bearing God in Advent,” *Christian Century*, December 21, 2016, 10.

was too wonderful for God. Mary responded, ‘Let it be done according to your will.’”²

As the months went by, Merritt remembers how her stomach stretched. “Then,” she writes, “I experienced a moment that forever changed my view of myself as a Christian and of God and salvation. I was in my third trimester, repeating the ancient words of institution during communion, when my belly began shifting around with those smooth oceanic movements. I looked down and even under the giant black robe I could see it moving, transforming into those alien shapes. My baby was just waking up and stretching. I smiled and thought, ““Oh no. Not now. Please, go back to sleep!””³

“I continued to look down, but this time my eyes searched for the lines in my prayer book, and I began reading the liturgy. I was afraid that I would become so distracted that I would lose my way if I tried to say the words from memory and so I lifted up the cup and resumed. ‘This cup is the new covenant sealed in my blood, shed for you for the forgiveness of sins. Whenever you drink it, do this in remembrance of me.’”⁴

² *Ibid.*, 10.

³ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 10.

“The movement was no longer a gentle rolling. I felt jabs, right under my rib cage. As I held the cup up, I gasped as the baby began playing soccer with my internal organs. My eyes widened, and I almost spilled the wine as she kicked me, hard. I could barely contain my laughter as I continued: ‘Every time you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the saving death of our risen Lord, until he comes.’ I stood there breathing deeply while this great and wonderful pain stretched me and transformed me, and with each jolt, a tremendous sense of creative power flooded me.”⁵

“Suddenly, this thought of Jesus coming again, which had always filled me with anxiety and fear, gave me hope. In that moment, as I spoke of Advent dreams – with Jesus coming again, my belly stretched – and broke the bread and poured the wine, I was filled with joy and longing instead of fear or vengeance.”⁶

What was Mary thinking as she prepared to give birth to Jesus? Was she, like Carol Howard Merritt, breathing deeply while a great and wonderful pain stretched over her and transformed her, with each jolt providing a tremendous sense of creative power? Is that what Mary was thinking and feeling?

⁵ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 10.

Or was the birth of Jesus more like a recent episode of *Saturday Night Live*, where a very tired Mary, portrayed by Emma Stone, pleads with Joseph to stop opening the door to visitors? For, one after another, they wish to enter the humble stable and catch a glimpse of the Christ-child.

“Whoever it is,” Mary insists, “just tell them to go away... I just gave birth to a baby... in a barn.” But, Joseph doesn’t get the hint, and welcomes them all in turn saying, “Yeah, sure. You can come in and take a look at the baby.”

As they enter, Mary offers, defensively, “Now I know that you are all probably judging me because there is no place to sit and I didn’t have time to get ready.” But, “You know, I have looked cute for every day of my fourteen-year-old life, and now we have literal kings visiting” and I look like this.

At this point, one of the wise men tries to comfort her, saying, “Mary, we care about your well-being.”

“Oh yeah?” she retorts, “Well, guess who didn’t? Every hotel owner in Bethlehem.”

Next another wise man does his best to ease the tension, saying, “We have come bearing gifts. We, the magi, have gold, frankincense, and myrrh.”

“Great,” Mary responds flatly. “I heard blankets, diapers, and a crib.”

Finally, though, and through tears, Mary explains the source of her strong reactions. “I’m sorry. It’s just that when I found out I was going to give birth to the Savior, I just assumed that it was going to be... you know, nicer. That there would be a real bed. And I don’t know, like, a doctor. And no sheep poop on the floor.”

It is right, of course, for us to celebrate this day. We gladly join the heavenly chorus in welcoming the birth of the Christ-child. And yet, we also know that this birth is full of contradictions. Yes. The one that we remember this night has the power to forgive sins and the power to save us. And yet, the child who arrives miraculously, bathed in light, life, and glory, also comes in simple, humble, human form. It is extraordinary that kings would come to bow at his feet. And yet, Jesus’ birth is entirely routine in its lack of opulence and luxury.

This holy family was chosen. But, not in the ways in which we might imagine. They found fame without fortune. Crushing criticism. Personal assault. Their

journey was never easy. Never secure. Never without trial or tribulation. And that is much of the appeal, is it not? For this God-made-flesh is truly and wonderfully one of us. Thanks be to God. Amen.