

I have been present for two births in my lifetime, but I only remember one. The first one was my own, and I couldn't tell you the first thing about what happened. The second birth was my son Asher's, and I remember it well. Sarah was going to take the two weeks leading up to his due date off work, which of course meant that he decided to come two weeks early—an early sign that we were no longer in control of our story. Labor was long, extending all through the night. I assure you it was not a silent night, but it was a holy night. We went through all the emotions, excitement, fear, pain—all had their place. All of them belonged.

Witnessing birth transformed how I tell the Christmas story. Now, it is far more personal and vulnerable. There's joy to be sure, but only on the far side of fear and trembling, blood, sacrifice, and tears. This is how God shows up. You see before new life can come into the world, first, a body is broken, and blood is shed. That didn't begin at the Last Supper. It's been a part of the cycle of life and death from the very beginning, and the story of Christmas is the story of God entering into that cycle, into this story, thus making all of it holy.

This old, old story is a story we all know, though easily forget, because it is the human story. It is our story. Luke doesn't tell us much about what the birth of Jesus was like, but simply that it happened: "The time came for Mary to have her baby. She gave birth to her firstborn child, a son, wrapped him snugly, and laid him in a manger." It all sounds so easy, doesn't it? Our nativity scenes make everything look rustic and cozy, almost like a nice Air B&B in the country. But no birth is cozy, nor easy. Each of us are born into this world through the great pain and sacrifice of our mothers. To be born is a gift, one that came at a great cost, and what makes that cost worthwhile is one simple small word, a word that is both overused and unappreciated, a word that appears so weak, yet has the power to move the world. You know what the word is, don't you? Love. What makes the cost of birth worthwhile is love. Love never comes to us without pain or sacrifice. But the pain and the sacrifice are worth it, for nothing matters more in our life than love.

The story of Christmas is a love story, and that's why we tell it.

I love to tell the story;
'twill be my theme in glory
to tell the old, old story
of Jesus and his love

Jesus wasn't born into wealth or power, but he did know love. Joseph takes Mary to Bethlehem to be counted in the census, which was more than an inconvenience. For Jews in the first century, to be counted in a census was not about representation but about imperial control and exploitation. The Empire doesn't care if you are nine months pregnant. You go where you are told to go, and you pay what they tell you to pay, and you don't want to find out what happens to those who resist.

Compared to Caesar and Quirinius, Jesus didn't have much, but he did have love, and love, it turns out, is enough. Despite what you may have heard or seen in Christmas pageants over the years, Jesus was most likely born in the home of Joseph's extended family, not in a stable, because there were no stand-alone stables in Israel at that time. Luke says that after Jesus was born, Mary laid him in a manger because there was no room for them in the guestroom, and that is the correct translation. Joseph and Mary weren't turned away at the Motel 6 in Bethlehem. The word guestroom has often been translated "inn," but the far better

translation is guestroom. At that time, homes had one or two rooms. In the first room, you kept the animals to keep them safe, and they helped keep you warm, and if you were lucky, you also had a guestroom. Either for privacy or because Joseph's family's guestroom was already full with everyone in town for the census, Jesus was all but certainly born in the home of Joseph's family, not born into wealth or power, but still surrounded by love.

In other words, Jesus was born into the world the way most people have been throughout history. It wasn't until very recently that birth has been taken out of the home and moved into the hospital. For all the good hospitals do for us, I've never heard anyone say, I can't wait to go to spend the night at the hospital! No, people who are in the hospital say, I just want to go home. Home is where the heart is. Home is a word we use to describe a place of safety, love, and belonging. Jesus' entire life story can be described as expanding the boundaries of home, so that everyone can know a place of safety, love, and belonging. Jesus is born into a community of love, and in what foreshadows the kind of life he would live, outsiders are immediately invited into the home as well, so they can share in this joy, and be part of the beloved community.

Shepherds were normal, hardworking people. Though we always picture them as men, women were shepherds then too, and may well have been in the fields watching over their flocks that night, when suddenly, God invites them to share in the joy of Christ's birth. The birth of Christ is a gift to be shared with all, a gift that celebrates that we are not alone in this story, that God is with us in our pain and our joy, making all of it holy. The story of Jesus' birth is a story of God using ordinary people to bring forth extraordinary love into this world. Though it may appear like Caesar and Quirinius are running the show, God is working through normal people who make space in their heart and home for new life to emerge and with it the hope of a world where everyone knows love and belonging. That's why we tell this story, for the promise of a world where everyone knows love and belonging. There's room for you in this story, in this beloved community.

After a long and painful labor, Asher was finally born. It was scary, and it was beautiful. This new life came into the world, only after a body was broken and blood was shed, and eventually we were able to sleep in heavenly peace. Though there was great joy when he finally arrived, this was not the end of our pain and sacrifice as parents. It was only the beginning. The pain and the sacrifice, the fear and the joy exist all alongside each other, and what makes it all worth it is one small word, a word that appears so weak, yet has the power to move the world. What is the word? Love. Love never comes to us without pain or sacrifice. But the pain and the sacrifice are worth it, for nothing matters more in our life than love.

Christ is born into our world of pain and sorrow, making all of it holy. God willingly and gladly enters this world of pain and sacrifice, so everyone might know themselves to be loved and to belong here. You were born into this world through great pain and sacrifice, all because you are loved. You are loved by God more than you know, and you belong here. Tonight, I pray that you sleep in the heavenly peace of knowing you are forever held by the love of God.