

Sermon, Dec. 24 2007, Christmas Eve at Midnight
Calvary Episcopal Church, Underhill, VT

Readings:

Isaiah 9:2-7

Psalm 96

Titus 2:11-14

Luke 2:1-20

“...but Mary kept all this things in her heart and thought of them often.”

There was a lot going on in that stable as Mary gave birth to her baby. There were barnyard animals all around her. They were probably *bothered* and *made uneasy* by the humans intruding in their place of rest and comfort. I doubt they had adoring little smiles on their faces as they gazed at the baby in their manger, which normally held their feed. It must have been cold and dirty there, and no doubt smelled of manure. Then, along came shepherds, who had been living in their fields. They probably made the aroma in the barn a little more pungent. Enter three kings later on, and who knows who else may have been attracted to all the commotion going on outside of the inn there in Bethlehem that night. A popular Christmas song claims a “little drummer boy” was there, playing his drum. It doesn’t sound like a very friendly or peaceful place to be having a baby. Mary was already overwhelmed enough without all the creatures stirring, and people entering the barn that night. Poor Mary, I bet she could have used some help. Hers was the greatest task taken on by any human in history. She was a poor, unwed, pregnant teenager, not the sort of person thought suitable for such a task. But God chose Mary and she promised to *help God*; she would deliver his Son, and raise him as her own. It was the only way that God could come and live as one of us.

I have another birthing story I’m going to tell you tonight. Many of you know that in another life, I was schooled to care for people from infants to the elderly. My masters degree in nursing focused on family health, and my first clinical assignment was in obstetrics.....yeah, the maternity ward. I had done well in my Women’s Health, Well baby, and Pediatrics classes, and I was present for the birth of my own daughters, but I was saying some *mighty fine* prayers the morning of my first day and first clinical at the birthing center....it was going to be different. I was supposed to help.

The place was overwhelming and chaotic, that morning, probably much like Mary’s birthing room; take away the barn setting, the animals, the shepherds and kings. I looked around for angels. The doctor who was supervising me handed me several patient charts, and said *“these ladies are in labor now, you go assess them, see if you can be of any help, and I’ll be back in an hour or so.”* As he hurried away, he didn’t hear me ask, *“assess what?”* There was an OB nurse within earshot of me and the doctor grinning from ear to ear. She said, *“I suggest you put those charts down, take this one, and start with Mrs. Brown. She’s in the room where all the yelling is coming from. She has been at it all night without much progress.”* Suddenly, I wished I’d had something more than 4 cups of coffee and a multi-vitamin for breakfast that day.

As I entered Mrs. Brown’s room she was rolling from side to side in her bed, trying to free herself of the fetal monitor that was placed around her abdomen. Her IV fluid bag was swinging from a pole that was ready to tip over, she was cursing, her

baby's heart beat was making loud squishing sounds through the monitor's speaker, and a nurse standing nearby her was cooing, "*there, there Mrs. Brown, everything will be alright, Dr. Miller's student is here now.*" This nurse was grinning at me from ear to ear also.

I made my way to Mrs. Brown's bedside, leaned down toward her, and putting a hand on her arm I said, "*Ah, hello Mrs. Brown, I'm Mr. Heidel, and I'm here to **help** Dr....*", but before I could finish my introduction, she grabbed the lapels of my spotless and neatly ironed white lab coat, pulled my face a couple of inches from her face and snarled through her tightly clenched teeth: "***FORGET THE DR., HELP ME FIRST!***" The reason I was there that morning suddenly became clear in spite of the all the distractions...I was supposed to help. "*There, there Mrs. Brown, Mr. Heidel can't **help** you if you don't let go of him,*" said grinning nurse number 2, as she helped free me and my lab coat from Mrs. Brown's grasp. "*Honey, you look as though you could use some help too, how 'bout I get you some coffee,*" she said to me. "*No thanks,*" I replied.

I righted myself, straightened my coat and took a look around the room, then at the fetal monitor, which the nurse was also looking toward, and Mrs. Brown began to have another contraction. "*Blow Mrs. Brown, don't push yet,*" I called out to her as the contraction rushed over her. The nurse continued to coax her..."*blow, blow, blow,*" as we watched her baby's EKG waves on the monitor. Her contractions flattened the EKG waves and slowed the baby's heart rate, very slow, and it was slow to return...too slow to return.

Once her contraction passed, her baby's heart returned to read and sound more normal through the monitor, but not as strong as before. The baby's heart raced instead of beating rhythmically. Grinning nurse number 2 was no longer grinning, as I anxiously flipped through the pages of Mrs. Brown's chart. We decided we had better find out if the maternity OR was available. Grinning once again the ob nurse said, "*Hot dog, a C-section on your first day!*" "*Please page Dr. Miller now, and **help** me get her ready to move, just in case,*" I said.

Dr. Miller sailed into the room just as Mrs. Brown began another shuddering contraction, and the same sagging depression occurred in the baby's vital signs. Watching the monitor and listening Miller asked me, "*deliver all the other babies yet Mr. Heidel.*" "*No, your other 3 students are **helping**, in the other rooms.*" "*Fantastic,*" he said, "*I'll go make sure they haven't fainted and you get Mrs. Brown ready to roll to the OR.*" "*Mrs. Brown, he called out, "it looks like we thought all along, we'll have to do a c-section to get this baby out and into the world."* Eyes closed, she panted, "*fine, fine, I'm ready.....just **help** me first.*"

In anticipation of a possible c-section for Mrs. Brown an anesthesiologist had already placed an epidural line, and while she injected the anesthesia drugs, which would interrupt all feeling below Mrs. Brown's chest, (and others to relax her), we prepped her for surgery.

I was scrubbed, gowned and gloved, when Miller entered the OR, himself scrubbed and ready to gown. We all paused, all eyes on the fetal monitor again, seeing and hearing the baby's heart rate slow, flattening the waves on her EKG. "*We've got to move here,*" said Miller, a bit more serious now. "*Get another scrub nurse in here to pass instruments so my student can assist me....scalpel scissors, clamp. Clamp and tie these vessels. Hurry, I can't see....**where's that other nurse....this boy won't learn***"

anything if he can't **help** me." "Rotate the OR bed a bit so he can see better....a little more, a little more....can you see in there Heidel? Now get both your hands ready to go in, be careful there's a baby in there.....now I'll make another incision and you get that baby out.....but don't drop it, ya here?" As I scooped my hands around the baby it moved... startled...and reached out its arms a bit as if to stretch a bit when I lifted it. "Put it up here on Mama," Miller said, "and hold out your hand." The scrub nurse slapped two clamps in my hand, "clamp the cord here and here....now clean her mouth and eyes so she can breathe easier and see the light." Her baby began to cry...."is it all right?" Mrs. Brown asked. "Tell her what it is, son," Miller said to me with his voice lowered....."it's a baby! I shouted. Miller sighed and said, "Good Lord, boy...she knows she had a baby....you've gone through all this and you blow the best part....now cut the cord dummy!" Leaning toward Mrs. Brown he said, "it's a little girl, honey....and its fat and fine as a little pig."

We wrapped baby girl Brown in a sterile pink blanket and let mom take a peek at her before we passed her off to the circulating nurses who would warm and attend to her. Through her tears and fatigue Mrs. Brown managed to say said, "thank you for **helping** me first today.

The story of Jesus' birth....this story we have all heard and treasured in our own hearts....*pictured* the scene of the birth in our own minds.....*created* the scene in our own miniature stables.....is quite different than the story I just told you, you're not likely to hear it again on Christmas Eve. But both stories have themes of bewilderment, fear, happiness, joy mixed with worry, and of course, **help**. That's pretty much how our lives go from cradle to grave...bewilderment, fear, happiness, joy mixed with worry....on and on, over and over, and we often need **help**. That's why God came to earth; he came to help, in person...in the person called Jesus Christ; he came to *live and die as one of us*.

Mary wasn't sure how her little boy's life would turn out although she thought she knew *who* and *what* he was. There were signs all around her the night of his birth confirming what the angel Gabriel told her, "*your baby will be Holy and he will be called the Son of God*" but Mary couldn't hardly believe it saying to Gabriel, "*may everything you have said about me come true*" (Luke 1:38). The angel left her, and all she could really do was "*keep all these things in her heart and think of them often*" (Luke 2:19). She cared for her baby as any mother would. Mary raised Jesus as her own, and eventually grew to know and understand her Holy son as the Christ, but Jesus would *leave much of the world* as uncertain about him as it was when he arrived. He came to help, but many misunderstood him; many still do today in spite of his real and human existence.

The shepherds came to the manger with their wild story about angels and guiding stars, the sovereign and supreme rulers of far away places came bearing gifts; perhaps seeking counsel, perhaps wishing to help; while other government officials were already plotting to do away with him.

Kings and leaders would seek this baby's favor, offering riches for his admiration and favor, but he would challenge and surpass their authority; coaxing the people to turn from their ways and to follow him...."*be not of this world,*" it cannot help save you, it will not **help** you in your time of greatest need.

So God made a brief appearance, left us plenty to wonder about, left us plenty to do, left some fair instructions for living....and then left. Paul, attempting to encourage

his disciple Titus wrote to him, “*we should live in this evil world with wisdom, honesty grace, and devotion to God, while we look forward with hope (with hope) to that wonderful day when our God and savior are revealed*” (Titus 2:13). And that, my friends, happens each and everyday....our help is here.

And now, its Christmas Day.....Merry Christmas.....and you’ve heard the story once again. You have heard two stories of incarnation tonight, one ancient and one modern. Thank you for bearing with me.

This is the time of year when Christian’s gather in community to celebrate God’s arrival, the very assurance of the Presence, our **help**. For the remaining hours of this day, I pray you will treasure the story once again, and above all,....of all you may have heard or all you may believe about Jesus.... remember he came to do one thing; he came to **help**: *He came to help you first....you are his favored one*. Keep **that** in your heart, and think of it often.