

"BIRTHING"

Luke 2:1-7

Christmas Day December 25, 2022

York Center Church of the Brethren

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Birthing is a messy business. Whether it is a baby or an idea, birthing can be hard work and it often costs us something- energy, time, health, money, sanity, relationships.

"Birthing" is the theme for today from poet, artist, and minister, Jan Richardson's book, NIGHT VISIONS: SEARCHING THE SHADOWS OF ADVENT AND CHRISTMAS. She writes, *"In the Northern Hemisphere, we celebrate Advent and Christmas in the midst of winter, when spring has long gone under-ground and new life remains stubbornly dormant. In the thick of winter, it becomes more difficult to discern what is waiting to come to life, what is longing to be born.*

The festival of Christmas offers a winter thaw, an opportunity to ponder new birth when the landscape around us, and perhaps within us, seems lifeless. The celebration of Christ's birth beckons us to consider what has lain dormant in our own lives, and what new life lies waiting beneath the surface. In this Holy season, we are invited to share with Mary and Joseph in giving birth to the holy." (1)

In the Middle Ages a German mystic, Meister Eckhart, wrote, *"We are all mothers of God, for God is always needing to be born."* Imagine that-- we too, men and women, can be mothers of God- willing to give birth to God's absurd dream in a variety of forms in this beautiful and ugly world in which we live.

Jan Richardson says we share in God's creative birthing when we offer hospitality, work for justice, teach a child. We share in giving birth when we freely offer ourselves for healing, for delight, for transformation, for peace.

As I said, birthing is a messy business. It is painful, exhausting, and sometimes dangerous. This is why it is so important for us to have midwives, companions on the journey, who will encourage us, push us, challenge us, comfort us, and hold us. This is, for me, the role of a congregation. As a family of faith, we help each other in the process of birthing, becoming, changing, and growing in our

faith and in our lives. We need each other to bring God's dream to life in this place.
As we assist others, we ourselves, are born anew.

Jan Richardson shares this prayer:

BLESS THEM

Who wait with us

Who labor with us

Who cry out with us.

BLESS THEM

Who know our limits

Who push us beyond them

Who see us through.

BLESS THEM

Who call us to our strengths

Who tend us in our weakness

Who dress each ragged wound

BLESS THEM

Who laugh in the face of convention

Who weep for our own pain

Who bid us to come and live.

Scripture gives us scant details about the birth of Jesus. We know his parents somehow ended up in a stable and had only each other to count on. But all we get of his birth is one lousy verse- just one- that describes this life-changing and life-giving birth. *"And she gave birth to her first-born son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger."*

I can imagine Mary was exhausted and maybe Joseph was in shock. And the next thing we know, a group of shepherds arrive, gob-smacked with wonder, after getting a personal birth announcement from a night sky full of angels. After they saw the newborn, they left, telling everyone about the baby. But that's it for the birth story. We must fill in the rest and we do- using our imaginations to add the adoration of the barn animals and maybe a gift of food from the innkeeper. All scripture tells us is that Mary and Joseph are left alone with their mystery in the manger as Mary ponders all that has happened.

You would think that the birth of the Messiah would have a more pleasant beginning. Maybe his parents wouldn't have had to travel by donkey nearly 90 miles from their home to Bethlehem due to the orders of a narcissistic autocrat when Mary was nine months pregnant. Maybe there would have been a fancy birthing suite available for them at a prestigious hospital. Maybe their first visitors wouldn't have been dirty, smelly shepherds. Maybe...

The contrast between the power of the Emperor and the powerlessness of Joseph and Mary could not be more stark. The contrast is important. This is the beginning of God's interference in this absurdly woeful and wonderful world. And it starts with birthing.

Perhaps the birth of this baby is meant to remind us that God's home is in our arms. Perhaps this birth is a reminder to us to be gob-smacked with wonder whenever we catch a glimpse of the holy in our ordinary world. Perhaps this birth is a reminder to us that God's faithfulness shows up, even when and where we least expect it.

After the year we have had, maybe you, like me, just want to stay in the stable and hold the baby. But we can't for the birthing may be over, but our living is just beginning.

My gift to you on this holiest of days is a prayer by Jan Richardson.

When we are spent
from the labor
and longing to rest
in our deliverance,
when we hunger
to stay
in the celebration
and crave a lasting sabbath,
you tell us
this is where

our work begins.

For the labor

that is never over,

give us strength;

for the healing

that is ever before us,

give us courage.

May our resting

be for renewal,

not forever;

and may we work

for nothing

save that

which makes

your people

whole.

People of God, hear the good news, the best news of all, Jesus is born!

He is born for us and within us!

Thanks be to God!

Amen.

End Notes:

- *NIGHT VISIONS:SEARCHING THE SHADOWS OF ADVENT AND CHRISTMAS, Jan Richardson. Wanton Gospellers Press. 1998 p. 74.*
 - *NIGHT VISIONS, P. 81.*
- NIGHT VISIONS, P. 8*