

Little Signs of Hope

Christmas Eve

December 24, 2017

We are experiencing a bit of a miracle here at St. Thomas. Six families are welcoming babies all around the same time. One just arrived – one couple just welcomed a beautiful new baby girl. Five more moms are great with child, patiently, or maybe not so patiently now, waiting until the days shall be accomplished in January, February, and March. No to mention several already born in 2017, including one in October, and the toddler parade we saw in the nativity pageant last week. We are making plans to expand the nursery and order more high chairs, which is a great thing to have to do.

I've served a lot of churches. Two were about twice as large as St. Thomas. The church I attended in high school was one of those big Baptist churches on TV. Before I came to St. Thomas, I was chaplain at a school which served about three hundred families. There was one school year when three teachers were expecting at the same time, but those due dates were more spread out. I don't ever remember six new babies all at once. This is quite unusual and exciting.

And while it will be delightful to have so many infants around, even one baby is exciting because every baby is a miracle.

We do not need to go in to too much detail on this holy night, but the biology of new life is an amazingly complex thing. Hormones. Protein interactions. Meiosis and mitosis. Chromosomes. For any baby to be born, everything has to happen at just the right time. And the peculiar combination that produces every human being is unique. If either of my kids had been born at different times they would not be who they are. We are all fearfully and wonderfully made.

Given how complicated all of this is, perhaps it should not surprise us that some children seem to come so easily and some only after a long struggle and some to parents who are not prepared to care for them and some not at all. Perhaps in the beginning, in God's original creation, all of this was easier. But in our fallen world everything is harder, even life itself. Life seems to burst forth wherever it can, regardless of how prepared we are to welcome it.

So when we consider Mary and Joseph, if we did not know the backstory about the angel, if we did not know the whole divine situation, we might look at this couple on their way to Bethlehem and think here are two people who are not prepared. They were not married. They were poor. They were refugees on the run. It was not a good time for a baby.

And it was not a good time in history. Luke's gospel was careful to place the birth of Jesus at a particular moment in time. Luke says it took place during the first registration while Quirinius

was governor of Syria. The Roman Empire taxed the poor heavily. This registration was for tax purposes, so it was not a welcome thing. The very name Quirinius was a reminder of a painful and oppressive political moment.

This mention of Quirinius is actually a puzzle to historians. While Luke said Jesus was born during the time of Quirinius, Luke also said the birth of John the Baptist just a few months earlier was in the time of King Herod. Matthew's gospel likewise placed the birth of Jesus in the time of King Herod. Herod was a despot so insecure in his reign when he heard about a newborn king he killed all the baby boys. However, as best historians can tell, Herod died ten years before Quirinius began his rule. After Herod's death, the kingdom was split into parts and Quirinius ruled one of those parts. They do not appear to have ruled at the same time.

Some folks get very worked up about this problem. Those who want to defend the inerrancy of scripture come up with complicated ways to explain Luke's chronology. Skeptics, on the other hand, point to this problem and say that since the Bible appears to be wrong on this detail none of it can be trusted.

But maybe we should cut gospel writers some slack. What if things were just so hard back then it all ran together in Luke's mind? Eighty or ninety years later, when the gospels were written, what if by then the writers couldn't remember which terrible ruler came first, Herod or Quirinius?

Consider our own troubled times. Eighty years from now, will we be able to remember which came first? The hurricanes that ravaged Puerto Rico and the Caribbean and the Gulf Coast, or the wildfires in Oregon and California? The mass shooting in Las Vegas or the mass shooting in Sutherland Springs? Tensions with North Korea or tensions in Charlottesville? The science march or the women's march or #metoo? Will we remember which loved ones we lost when? Will we remember which came first? Or will we just remember that 2017 was a hard year?

The time from Herod the Great to the rule of Quirinius was a really hard time. People lived under constant threat. But things just went downhill from there. By the time Luke wrote all of this down and people were reading about the birth of Jesus, the situation had gone from bad to worse. Jerusalem and the Temple had been destroyed, the people were scattered, and it was the end of the world as they knew it. Luke and his readers were living in their own difficult time.

So in another horrible time, eighty or ninety years after the birth of Jesus, Luke reminded his readers of this good news. Jesus was born not when everything was happy and rosy but in the days of Herod and Quirinius. Jesus was born to a world in crisis, in a stable in an unstable part of the world, to a desperate couple with no place to lay their heads. Yet even in that time, the angels sang Glory to God in the Highest. Luke was saying to his readers, in their own difficult time, even now there is hope. God is always working for good.

I have a friend whose daughter was born at the end of 2002, another difficult time in history. She and her husband had spent a long time deciding whether to have children at all. But after 9/11 they made up their minds. They wanted to make the world a little better, and one way they felt

they could do that was to bring a new life into the world. Their child was an intentional, defiant act of hope.

And in a similar way, God brought hope to the world through a baby. We claim in the creeds that Jesus was born of the Virgin Mary. The point of the virgin birth is not the biology of it. It is the intentionality. It is a mysterious way to confess that God willed Jesus into being in a way far beyond human capacity.

God did this intentionally and defiantly. God did this to make this world better. For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son is not just about the cross. It is also about Christmas. In him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it.

So here we are, at the end of a strange and in some ways difficult year. It has not been the worst of times, for sure, but it has not been the best of times.

Nevertheless, in this community we are preparing to celebrate several births. These new babies are not God incarnate. They are not baby Jesus, though we will do our best to treat them like they are! But they are gifts from God in the image of God born of God who is still working to bring life and make all things new. They are a little sign of hope that life and love and joy are always on their way.

This hope comes in other forms as well. Like a baby born screaming into the night, the life of God breaks forth everywhere it can. We see it in the ways we help one another in the midst of tragedies. We see it in people who keep working for good even when times are hard. We see it in each day's gorgeous sunrise. We see it in the healing of our griefs. We see it in the ability to endure.

And we see it tonight – gathered here, surrounded by candles, filled with love, remembering Immanuel, God with us.

Howard Thurman was a great theologian of the 20th century, born in 1899. His grandmother had been enslaved. He grew up hearing her stories. He mentored Martin Luther King, Jr. and other civil rights leaders, and he was still alive when his most famous student was killed.

In 1973, in the middle of Watergate and the oil embargo and Vietnam and the Cold War, he published this poem of hope for Christmas. I offer it as a hope-filled prayer.

*I will light candles this Christmas,
Candles of joy despite all the sadness,
Candles of hope where despair keeps watch,
Candles of courage for fears ever present,
Candles of peace for tempest-tossed days,
Candles of grace to ease heavy burdens,
Candles of love to inspire all my living,
Candles that will burn all year long.ⁱ*

ⁱ Howard Thurman, *The Mood of Christmas*, 1985, 4th edition, Friends United Press.