

Christmas 2009

“But Mary treasured these words and pondered them in her heart”

I received an E-mail just a few days ago from my friend Catherine Keller, notable theologian who lives in New York City. At the end of her note she said, “Have a blessed Nativity....and blessed be all your other difficult births.” Birth is difficult...I have first hand experience...well, actually second hand experience....I witnessed the births of my children...These births all looked difficult to me....the consummate labor of love...birth.....birth a consummate metaphor for sacrifice...My nurse used to tell me that you can't really know the true way of things until you have given birth...I think that's probably true... at each and every birth new light comes into the world....I have seen that....and seeing is believing.

We just read from Luke concerning a birth...and I want to suggest, however, that the central character of this passage is not Jesus whose name is not mentioned in it... I want to suggest that the central character is Mary, the birth giver...Jesus will take center stage later in this Gospel...but here...on this night of nights...we marvel at the one who gives birth....this light birth...this love labor.

And indeed this birth, no different from all births, is difficult, Luke tells us...Mary and Joseph are harried by the ways of Imperial occupation...made to travel in dangerous circumstances like refugees... to be counted, registered by the Roman government for taxation and military conscription... Mary is in late term pregnancy, a scandalous pregnancy at that...there is nothing serene about this birth... a birth among farm animals...at the margins of existence...in a dark corner of the world...amid fear and uncertainty... shepherds, a disgrace in this ancient world, the oracle of such a difficult birth “a cold coming we had of it...just the worst time of year.” T.S. Eliot puts it....We have so romanticized this scene, institutionalized it, that I'm afraid we miss the passionate urgency of it that Luke intends...Luke paints a picture of a chaotic and oppressive world in the dark....a world yearning for the light...yes, this would be a difficult birth....a consummate labor of love...a difficult world changing birth, as all births are...new life, when it comes, comes at a cost....love's labor.

Mary, the central figure in this passage, the protagonist in the first few chapters of Luke....Mary is all of us, dear people of God, all of us mothers of new life for our world....all of us bearers of the Christ child...this child who will grow and mature and show us what to be fully human means in truth...all of us bearers of the light of the world...the life light...the light of justice, the light of healing, the light of compassion and mercy and kindness...the light of hospitality and love of neighbor....the light of peace...the light of hope and potential that comes with each and every birth...these virtues in the life and teaching of Jesus of Nazareth...rudiments of creation set right...God's life set loose in earth which is our true humanity....the true way of things....the light of God and the light of humankind....one light....one light birthed time and again in life's grand sojourn, in difficulty, in a difficult world....the light birth, ours and the stars that begot us.

And this birth is no miracle...there's nothing magical here... here but the beauty of reality only...the way the world is at its heart...the shimmering testimony that God is forever born among us...In every birth, in any manner of birth, hope and potential is made manifest in earth.... In every birth the world is changed utterly...and it is difficult work, this labor we are called to bear....love's labor.

So blessed mothers and midwives, all of us...blessed be all your difficult births....blessed be the fruit of your womb...blessed be the light that you bear in this late term...blessed be your labors of love...for you bear a great light...a light that overcomes the dark of our world...a light that casts out fear...brothers and sisters treasure the word of light and life this night and ponder them in the depths of your hearts...for this birth of liberation comes in all urgency....this light birth....and all the world waits...waits to shout with joy....the pangs of birth have begun...and the light breaks upon us...and seeing it... is believing it.