



# CHRIST CHURCH CRANBROOK

*Christ is Born in us\_ - Christmas Eve- 12\_24\_2021*

I speak to you tonight as a sinner to sinners, as the beloved of God to God's beloved, as one called to bear witness to those called to bear witness. Amen.

In 2014, my father-in-law died and the family decided that we needed to move my mother-in-law into assisted living because her dementia had gotten so bad that she couldn't be by herself. And we went through their house that they lived in for many years. And one of the places that we went into was the studio where my mother-in-law worked. She was an incredible artist and she was constantly working on different projects in her studio. And she never sold or showed any of her work. She never felt that they were ready for a wider audience. The only time she sold a piece was to a next door neighbor who was dying of cancer and begged her as a dying wish to own one of her pieces.

And yet, despite this, she was one of the most remarkable artists I have seen, and kind of a sleeper, someone that should be known, because she had this way of putting things together that was so incredible. And when we were going through the studio and going through her art, I discovered these woodcuts that she made in the 1970s. And this was a way of trying to personalize the annual Christmas card many years ago, before the e-cards that we tend to send now. And before the long messages that came out. The kind of broadsides that we send our friends.

And before the other cards that we were sending from Hallmark, people thought to make their own cards for their friends, and she decided to make these woodcuts. They were astonishing and beautiful and shocking and surprisingly religious. I say surprisingly religious, because my mother-in-law before she began to suffer from dementia, had let me know that she had lost her faith. As she put in a publication that she wrote for a college, she said that she decided that art would be her religion. And part of my own love of art was because I got to know her as her son-in-law, but also because I was trying to find the kind of path back for her from art back to religion. But these woodcuts were astonishing.

And recently Phoebe, my eldest child was able to digitally transfer the woodcut and to provide it with a color that I remember seeing her use in one of the iterations. And it's on the cover of your bulletin and it's right here. And I want to walk you through this piece because it helps me say what I want to say today. And one of the things to notice in it is every piece, every gesture in this seemingly simple arts and crafts kind of piece is deeply significant. And so Mary, in this image is sitting on a crescent moon, which is highly unusual for these kinds of depictions of Mary, but the crescent moon in art is meant to signify fertility and the point of meeting between life and death, the liminal space between life and death.

And so there is something really powerful to placing Mary on that crescent moon. She herself has been incredibly, mysteriously, miraculously fertile, and she is sitting on this borderline between life and death. She is about to give birth, which in those days was a struggle between life and death, biologically for many women, but also because she is about to give birth to a child whose life would put death to death.

And so Mary sits on a crescent moon. And the star in this woodcut is so fascinating because. It has a kind of envelopment of light and darkness. It's like the light is coming out of the darkness and then dispelling the darkness around it. And this goes with the grain of one of the great Christian movements and thoughts, which is that when God created the world, God created the world from nothing. God was not like a carpenter who was working with material. But God actually created all things. When God said, "Let there be light," there was no such thing as light before God said, "Let there be light," and then light came to be.

And that same power of creation was expressed, Christians believe, in the incarnation of Jesus. The incarnation is that moment in which God speaks into being the person of Christ. And of course in the Resurrection, there is another moment of God creating, again, breathing out life and light out of nothing. And in this image, there is this incredible intimacy between Mary, the mother, and Jesus, the child. Jesus is nursing on Mary's breast. And you see this in Renaissance art often. And in those depictions, Jesus is kind of fastened onto Mary or looking at Mary's breast. And then He's always giving the viewer the side eye as if, to say, keep your distance, she's mine. Or, you see how beautiful Mary is. You should be likewise.

But there is no judgment, no accusation, no kind of looking down on the viewer. In this, the child, Jesus has completely forgotten the viewer. He's completely latched on. God, having become vulnerable, having become a baby, having become a child with complete needs is feeding from Mary. He's finding her to be His sustenance. He has given Himself to her completely. And in return, she is giving herself to Him. The intimacy between the child, Jesus and Mary, in this woodcut is so simple, the gestures seem to capture that kind of intimacy and privacy that you see when a mother is nursing a child in an airport terminal or in a bus terminal, in a moment of public space, apart, perhaps, those moments in which you walk by and you see the mother and child locked in on each other, attending to each other, focused on each other. And that privacy and intimacy almost becomes a kind of protection, a kind of space that no one dares cross.

But most of all, what struck me as I looked at this woodcut, and it's something that is different from all the other woodcuts she did, there is this word, "Noel." And I've been thinking about this word, Noel over the past couple of weeks. Why did she put it there? Now, of course, one reason is that this is an abbreviation of the French Joyeux Noel, which is the greeting Merry Christmas in French. Julia Child lived in the same city and occasionally my in-laws would drift into very bad French.

And so maybe this was just a bit of playfulness, but I don't think so when I look at this image. When I look at this image, I see Noel as a kind of sign of what this is all about. The word Noel is from the old French "nael," which means "birth," which is again from the

Latin *dies natalis* or the day of birth, or *natus* or *nasce*, to be born. Noel is to signify the primacy of birth, that this birth is overcoming everything that opposes it.

And my mother-in-law's faith at this point remains unknown to me. I don't know whether her beliefs were waning or not when she painted this or did this woodcutting. And because I discovered it after she began to suffer from dementia, I couldn't ask her because she wouldn't remember. But it is full of meaning. And I think that Noel was kind of representation to her of some kind of great devotion. That that power to begin, that power to be born, that power that is inside of us by nature, but through Christ by grace to experience ourselves and our world anew and alive.

Hannah Arendt, the great philosopher who was a refugee and a Holocaust survivor, who suffered from anti-Semitism that was bitter and repressive, who had fled from Germany to France, and then from France to Switzerland, then from Switzerland down to Portugal and finally to America, who wrote some of the most poignant books about the banality of evil. The fact that evil is something that ordinary people do, not psychopaths, not fantastic evil geniuses, just ordinary people like you and me are capable of evil.

Hannah Arendt had as her signal contribution to philosophy a concept about birth. And she called it “natality,” which is again from the Latin *natus* or *nasce*, to be born. She said that every society has within it the kind of movement that will bring itself to its own ruin. They'll have a kind of default towards death and evil and sin. But the power of a good society, what makes a society humane is that power of “natality,” that power to be born, that power to begin. And this was not just something that applied to societies. This was a claim she made for all of humanity.

In an incredible book called “The Human Condition,” she writes, we are not born in order to die, but to begin. Natality is revealed whenever a stranger enters a town, whenever a child is born into this world, or wherever there's any kind of disruption, there is the chance to begin again. And Arendt, who survived the Holocaust, who escaped from a concentration camp when someone misplaced papers that she found and she used to leave, Arendt, who had seen evil face to face, placed her hope in this birth, in this “natality.” She believed that it had the power to redeem us.

Now, Christianity has its own beliefs about “natality” connected directly to Jesus Christ. We believe that Christ is born in us. It's not that you and I merely know Jesus as a great philosopher. It's not that we know Jesus as a rabbi or a teacher or a moral superhero. It is the fact that you and I have a living relationship with Jesus in which Christ lives in us and we are changed. And that birth inside of us goes with the grain of Mary's caring of Jesus, because what I love most about this woodcut that my mother did is the fact that this Mary is not a Mary that represents womanhood as such, but she represents the women who bear children every day. And she reminds us that of all the things we might say about Mary, the most powerful thing we could say is that she is the first Christian because Christ is born in her. You and I are part of God's incredible world when Christ is born in us.

The great theologian and philosopher, Jonathan Edwards from the 18th century, he in an incredible book published in 1729, said that the nature of faith is not that we come to

believe a proposition about things, or even a concept, but that Christ is born in us like Mary. Births are chaotic. They cannot be planned. As much as we think we can control them by inducing a pregnancy, what happens is really up to powers greater than ourselves. And so there is a kind of analog between physical births and the surprising power of life revealed in them and spiritual births that you and I experience. When we are spiritually born again, it's always a surprise and it's always something that is total, that takes on our whole self and changes us in an instant and engrosses us in the life that is inside us that is Christ.

Spiritual births are also different from regular births in that, in the same way that a birth is done in terms of a physical family, so spiritual births are surrounded by a kind of web of relationship. Saint Augustine writing about the birth of Christ said that Christ is born in us when we begin to experience love and gratitude for everything that surrounds us, everything that surrounds us in this web of relationships that we find ourselves in, however tangled, however tenuous, however challenging they may seem at the holidays, all of those relationships around us are the theater of our birth. So that when we begin again, when we change, when we have that power to depart from the past, it's always in the present of those we love.

Finally, one of the things that is true about spiritual birth that is similar to physical birth is that our spiritual birth is always in the process of beginning. In physical births, there is a kind of gestation and a thriving, and then there is a dying, but the spiritual birth that we have in Christ, this is a kind of birth that will forever bring us again and again, into the beginning. Hannah Arendt put it this way, "We are not mortals." By that she means the term "mortal" derived from the Latin *mort* or death, our greatest capacity and our identifying characteristic is not to die. We are natal. We are people who are capable of being born, of beginning again. That is what makes humanity special. And that humanity is what Christ assumed and transformed when He was born of Mary.

So this Christmas, I invite you to see and feel the birth of Christ within you. Care for the Christ within you. Martin Luther was scared of making this comparison. He said, let your manger be your heart so that Christ may rest inside it. But I think Mary is the better image. Let your soul be like Mary pregnant with Christ, alive with Christ. Nurture the Christ within you. Give yourself fully to the Christ inside of you and let that Christ thrive and grow and allow you to change.

In 1868, Phillips Brooks wrote that famous hymn, O Little Town of Bethlehem. The last line has always struck me.

Oh, holy Child of Bethlehem,  
Descend to us, we pray;  
Cast out our sin, and enter in,  
Be born in us today.

May this prayer be yours and mine. And may this prayer be answered by the God who came among us and loved us through and through.

Amen.

