

If you are like me, you have come to this night laden with obligations, expectations and desires and even anxieties. There are family traditions to observe. There are family relations to navigate. There are gifts to give and gifts to graciously receive. There are children to cuddle. There are spouses to hug and sway with in the kitchen. There are meals to cook. There are services to attend and social obligations to keep. There are stories to retell because in their retelling we find new life. And there are services to attend with the hope that what we experience might change us anew.

And the most important story we tell this night, however, is about the incarnation of the Word, the coming of Christ, the beginning of Jesus being with us as Emmanuel. And in the midst of all of this activity, there is the temptation and the threat that we will somehow miss the message of Christmas. In the midst of our anxieties, in the midst of the obligations, in the midst of the expectations, in the midst of the desires we have for this night, we run the risk of missing the message of Christmas.

And so instead of beginning with a touching story, or maybe a funny anecdote about a Christmas past or a poem, I want to begin by emphasizing today the message of Christmas, because we ignore it at our peril. And the message of Christmas is this: Just as Christ was born of Mary so must Christ be born in us.

If we miss that message, it does not matter how much of the story we revisit. It does not matter how many traditions we keep. It does not matter how much love we share. If we miss that message of the birth of Christ in us. And the way that somehow goes with the grain of the birth of Christ and Mary, we miss the message of Christmas. Because Christmas is the story of Mary going into the birth of Jesus in complete openness and vulnerability and going through a process of transformation by which Christ is born of her.

And whatever else we might say of Mary, whether we want to see her as some kind of ideal of maidenhood or womanhood, whether we want to see her as a kind of object or a person of veneration, whether we want to see her as the God bearer as she is known in the Eastern church. The most important thing for us to notice is that Mary is the first Christian because she bears Christ within her.

And you and I, when Christ is born in us, that is what makes us a Christian. We might be a follower of Jesus. We might admire him as a teacher. We might try to live by the Christian philosophy, but the key move in our faith is when Christ lives in us. And we experience that life as a rebirth, as a regeneration, as a renewal, as a resurrection.

And the scriptures are clear about this in the New Testament, in the gospel of John, Jesus says, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above. And in the Epistle to Titus, we read that God saved us not because of any works of righteousness that we had done, but according to His mercy, through the water of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit.

And in the First Epistle to John, we read, "Let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whatever is born of God conquers the world." These passages trace not only a metaphor, but they describe a reality upon which the Christian faith hinges. Christ must be born in us. We must be remade by

Him. Christ must live in us. This is why Saint Paul writes, "It is no longer I who live but Christ who lives within me." And Christmas is a time in which we reunite ourselves with the foundational moment of Christ's birth to marry and His birth in us.

Now, I realize what I am saying tonight is something that you might have heard when you listened to the higher frequencies of AM radio or go into deep into the numbers of your cable television. There are many who will say that we must be born again, and this is true. But I want to stress to you the fact tonight that that emphasis on being born again is not something new, but in fact, it is one of the oldest messages of Christianity.

In your bulletins today I've placed and insert from the Visconti Book of Hours. This is a couple of images that I took from a kind of prayer book that was meant to order the day for a worshiper in the late 14th and early 15th century. And in the plate marked the Nativity, you see this incredible image of the birth of Christ, and this is an image that does not exactly replicate what we find in today's gospel from Luke or from Matthew.

But it is meant to be a kind of prayerful and habitation of the text itself. A kind of way in which the artist recreates in his mind so that the worshiper who reads the Book of Hours would recreate in their minds the truth of what it means to follow Christ. And in it you have the center, Mary handing over Jesus, who has just been born to another midwife so that Jesus might be washed.

And you have a midwife in the front preparing bath water, which looks not only like water, which is meant to be a reference to baptism, but also a little bit like wine, which is meant to be a reference to Jesus's first miracle. And Joseph in the front is warming a blanket by the fire so that he can wrap the Baby Jesus in the blanket once He is finished being washed. And the ox and the ass are kneeling before Jesus and worshipping Him, and in the corners of the painting, you see the shepherds being called to come and worship Christ by the angels.

And at the center of it is Latin instructions, which instruct the reader to look at this image and follow the prayers to be said at matins according to the Roman rite, in which there is a prayer, and thanks to God for Mary who is full of grace, and also a reading from Psalm 95 in which we read, "If you hear His voice today, harden not your hearts."

So this image of the Nativity was meant to be a lens through which the worshiper who would be following this Book of Hours would see their own rebirth in Christ. To see what it meant to have the Nativity become real in their own context and their own time and place in the complex fabric of their life. And this was a way of inhabiting the world of what it meant to be a Christian.

On the flip side of this image, you have one more image from the Book of Hours, which is incredibly powerful. In it, you have Mary at her death. Again, this is not something that we find in the scriptures, but it is a kind of prayerful entry into the legends and stories of the church so that the truth of the gospel might be revealed. And in this incredible painting, you have Mary surrounded by the apostles, and as she dies, there is a theophany in which God the Father comes and carries and brings Mary's soul, which is like an infant into His arms.

And here again, you have a kind of lesson for the worshiper who is meant to see in Mary's movement from death to life, a little bit of the kind of birth we have as Christians because what makes the birth we have in Christ different from biological and natural births is that biological births go from birth to death. When we are born in Christ, we move from death to life.

And Mary's experience of moving from death to life was a kind of incredible fulfillment of all that she did on Earth. Her soul becomes, as a child, to remind the viewer of the work she did in caring for Christ as an infant and as a child.

So this idea of entwining the birth of Christ to Mary and the new birth you and I must receive in order to fully activate our faith, this is something that goes with the grain of the most ancient traditions of our church. This is not something new, but it's something which becomes new every day, which is something that you and I must claim every day.

And births are, no matter what kind they are, births are chaotic. Births are painful, births are confusing, births are frightening. They often happen at the worst time possible. Births are moments in which we cannot predict when they're going to happen, and yet births are also moments of transformation. Because the fruit of being born is that there is a new relationship of trust and a new relationship of mutual recognition in mirroring that is incredibly beautiful and grace-filled no matter of what the birth is.

Twenty-two years ago when my wife Claire gave birth to our first child, Phoebe, it was such a moment of chaos and crisis and even anxiety. At 28 weeks, Claire went into labor and we were a bit fearful and she spent two weeks in the hospital while we tried to somehow delay the birth of our daughter as late as possible. And at 30 weeks Phoebe was born. And we were at a university hospital. It wasn't quite the kind of luxury experience that most people experience today when they give birth. There were just three of us in the room; a midwife, myself and an observing physician who kind of moved in and out of the room.

And I put my head close to Claire and I held her hand and I was surprised at just how tight her grip was. And our heads were touching and she was screaming and trying and straining with labor. And I watched as every capillary on her face burst and became a bit bloody. And then our child was born and she was safe and sound. She was whisked off to the intensive care unit and Claire was placed in a wheelchair and wheeled in to see her. And I'll never forget that moment of encounter when my daughter, still covered in lanolin, was embraced by Claire for the first time. She reached over and picked up one of her feet and kissed it and then kissed her legs. And then kissed her belly and then kissed her cheeks.

Births are chaotic. They're hard to predict. They're full of tension, but all of those things give way to trust and mutual recognition. And it's in that relationship of trust and mutual recognition that we are fully changed and made new. And it's at that moment that we are changed and made new, no matter what birth it is.

And the birth we have in Christ is like every other birth. It's a moment in which a new relationship comes into being and which there is trust and mutual recognition between

ourselves and God. And yet there are two ways in which our relationship with God and the birth we have in Christ is different from every other birth.

The first is, as I have said, a movement that goes not from life to death, but a movement from death to life. When we are born again in Christ, we begin our journey to resurrection. Resurrection begins at that moment of rebirth, not at our moment of death. Resurrection begins when we are born again, and we've received the power to live as if death were not. And secondly, the birth we experience through Christ comes at any time, in any place. At times when we least expect it.

Last week I was having dinner with a new parishioner to Christ Church Cranbrook, and we were supposed to talk about those moments when we experience a kind of wow in our life. And he told a story that I found incredibly powerful. He said that a decade ago he became seriously ill and he was fearing for his life. And he was lying in the hospital bed and he was just trembling with fear. And his wife got into the hospital bed next to him and cradled him in her arms and said, it's going to be all right. Everything is going to be all right.

And in that moment, an energy came around him and worked through him. He experienced this profound change and he knew that no matter what would happen as a result of that illness, that indeed everything would be right. And that energy served as a kind of guide to him that led him ultimately here. It was by following that energy that he found his way to the energy that is in us and here.

Christmas must be born. The mystic Howard Thurman writes, it must be born in you and me and in all humanity. This Christmas, do not neglect the Christmas message. Make space for some time to recognize what in you needs to be renewed by God's spirit. What in you needs to be reborn. This Christmas, make time to step a little deeper into that relationship of trust and mutual recognition between you and God.

This Christmas, make time so that you might hear anew the angels sing and say glory to God in the highest and peace with whom He is pleased.

[End of Recording]