

Jesus' bloody birth

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I don't have the nerve to stand up on Christmas Eve and preach about the choreography of childbirth, but I wish I did.

I wish I had the nerve to preach about Mary's increased estrogen production, a few days before birth (estrogen that will soften her cervix, and help her blood coagulate after delivery). I wish I had the nerve to preach about Mary's and Jesus' pituitary glands producing oxytocin, which in turn allows Mary's contractions to accelerate. I wish I had the nerve to preach that Mary and Jesus have to cooperate in birth, as all mothers and babies do--Jesus' own head stretches Mary's cervix, which in turn triggers her pituitary gland to release more oxytocin, which in turn stimulates contractions.

I wish I had the nerve to describe all that in my Christmas Eve homily, but I don't. It would seem somehow impolite to pester the people in my polite Episcopal church with a Yuletide description of Mary's cervix.

I'm not alone in sidestepping the bodily details of Jesus' birth. Over the centuries, many Christians who have pondered the Nativity have imagined Jesus' birth as swift and painless. In these reconstructions, Joseph gets Mary situated next to some barnyard animals, and then he leaves--in search of midwives, or sometimes a candle. When he returns, he finds that Mary has already given birth: no assistance was needed, because her labor was a snap. Mary, after all, is without sin, and pains in childbirth, the logic goes, are a mark of the fall--ergo, Mary would labor, one text

tells us, “without a murmur or a lesion.”

No murmurs or lesions, and presumably no danger either--no danger of Mary's bleeding out, no danger of either mother or baby dying in childbirth. Theologian colleagues tell me it is heretical to suggest that Jesus could have died in childbirth. I acknowledge that it is speculative--though no more so than Joseph's going out in search of candles--but it seems to me a fruitful speculation.

In coming to earth, Jesus enters, bodily, into vulnerability. That bodily vulnerability culminates in Jesus' being put to death by the state, but it is vulnerability that also shadows his birth. Put bluntly: lots of babies died in childbirth in antiquity, and lots of mothers, too. Jesus could have died in Bethlehem; the cross and the manger could have become the same moment.

Something important is lost, I think, in evading the details of childbirth. We evade them because we are uncomfortable--but of all times of year, Christmas Eve is not the time to evade Jesus' humanity. If we do, we are ultimately evading Jesus, choosing a polite Docetism over bloody Jesus.

Jesus, of course, is bloody in many senses. Jesus is the God who becomes blood-filled. Jesus is the God who will shed blood for our salvation, and nourish the church eucharistically with his blood. And Jesus is bloody in the sense of the English curse word, which comes, dictionaries tell us, from the phrase “by our lady.”

The lady is Mary, and the adjectival curse comes about by contraction.