

A midwife to all the nations: Luke 3:7-18; Zephaniah 3:14-20

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We did a lot of breathing through our teeth: “Hee, hee, hoo. Hee, hee, hoo. Hee, hee, hoo.” The instructor said this breathing would help mitigate the pain of labor, and it did, until we hit that thing called transition (the most intense phase of labor when even the strongest women momentarily lose faith in their ability to bring new life into the world).

I was no exception. After six solid hours of labor, transition arrived, and I grabbed my husband by the collar of his shirt, pulled him close and groaned, “I can’t do this anymore!” Then I took hold of the midwife. “It’s too hard. I can’t do it.”

She looked at me with a clear, steady gaze and spoke in a voice as ancient as Shiphrah’s. “Liz, you *are* doing it. Right now. This is what you were created to do—and you’re doing it.” So we breathed and I pushed, and after some of the most painful, difficult hours of my life, a slippery little baby came into the world. We took one look at him and fell in love.

I was proud of my body when I was pregnant. “I’ve gained 60 pounds,” I’d say to strangers and friends alike, “and no stretch marks! Can you believe it? I weigh over 200 pounds and no stretch marks!”

Well, vanity has a way of catching up with you. After that little baby slipped into the world and my stomach was as empty as the tomb on Sunday morning, I saw them: bright blue stretch marks hiding on the southern hemisphere of my belly and, to my horror, creeping right down my thighs.

In Luke 3, John the Baptist is calling for a change as radical and potentially challenging as childbirth. Can you see him? He’s the red-faced preacher standing thigh-high in the waters of the River Jordan, yelling at the crowds who came out to be baptized, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance!”

This is not the emotional, misty-eyed, altar-call style of repentance I grew up with as a child. This is a call to metanoia, a fundamental change of heart, soul, mind—and

behavior. For John, true repentance “bears fruit” in lives patterned after the God who, in Zephaniah’s song of restoration, “saves the lame, gathers the outcast, and transforms shame into praise.” What’s more, John insists, the stakes are high, for every tree that does not bear this kind of fruit will be “cut down and thrown into the fire.”

Our response is the same today as it was for those in the crowd 2,000 years ago: “What then shall we do?”

Well, let’s start with where we are. ‘Tis the season of mobbed malls, credit card debt, to-do lists, dysfunctional relatives and pants that used to fit. How can we slow down? How can we simplify? How can we start “turning around” when, according to the good folks at the Advent Conspiracy movement, we Americans spend \$450 billion on Christmas every year?

John’s answer is simple: “Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.” Yet it’s not so simple. I don’t know about you, but I have more than one coat. I have more than two, actually, and something deep down inside of me doesn’t buy it when, in an impressive gesture of Christian generosity, I drop off a coat or two (one that no longer fits and one that I no longer like) at the Salvation Army.

John’s preaching cuts like an ax to the bone. Jesus is no picnic either. Can you see him, that red-faced preacher standing among baskets of leftover bread and fish? “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me” (Luke 9:23). Can you hear him, counseling not only that rich young ruler but you and me? “Sell all that you own and distribute the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me” (Luke 18:22).

It’s enough to make you start breathing through your teeth: “Hee, hee, hoo.” It’s enough to make bright blue stretch marks appear upon your soul because repentance is not easy. Christian discipleship is not easy. There will come a time when we find ourselves taking hold of John the Baptist by his camel-hair collar and saying, “It’s too hard! I can’t do it.”

But think of this: before John slipped Jesus into the water, before the heavens opened and the Holy Spirit descended like a dove, John proclaimed the good news to the people: You do not have to do this alone! One is coming who is more powerful than I, and that one will be a midwife to all the nations. When you find yourself

saying, “It’s too hard! I can’t do it!” that one will look at you with a clear, steady gaze and speak in a voice as ancient as Shiphrah’s: “You *are* doing it. Right now. This is what you were created to do—and you’re doing it. Keep breathing. Keep pushing!”

The new baby is on its way. Can’t you feel it? All creation is groaning as if in labor. God’s new world is slipping into being even now, and with the Spirit’s help, we can play our part, breathing through our teeth, letting our skin be stretched and throwing the doors of our hearts wide open to change.

This is the sweet fruit of repentance, and the sweet promise of Advent.