Opinion
Spirituality



(Unsplash/Chris Sowder)



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> *While they were there, the time came for her to have her child, and she gave birth to her firstborn son. She wrapped him in swaddling clothes and laid him in a manger. Because there was no room for them at the inn — Luke 2:6-7*

In reflecting on this much beloved Christmas story from Luke two things stand out for me.

The first is the reality that the pregnant Mary and her husband, Joseph, had very little power or control over their own circumstances. What expectant parents would ever travel to a distant village, away from family and friends when their first-born child was due at any moment?

Only a family that had no choice but to comply with the demands of an oppressive, occupying government, and a complicit religious leadership, both demanding exorbitant civil and temple taxes — despite the subsistence level standard of living for most in Palestine.

And then there is the matter of accommodations. No Holiday Inn here. No welcoming concierge. No room service — only a shelter for animals, only socially unacceptable shepherds — socially unacceptable because they smelled like the sheep they tended — possibly sheep the temple priests used for sacrifice.

The picture Luke paints is that of a low-income family, on the margins of society, desperately seeking shelter so that Mary could labor and give birth protected from the elements. I wonder how many refugee families from Syria, Iraq, or Nigeria find themselves in similarly desperate circumstances this very night.

The second thing that stands out, is how easily the Lukan author glides over the messy realities of labor and birth. We hear a lot about the politics requiring Joseph to register in his hometown, about the shepherds keeping watch, and about heavenly hosts of angels celebrating.

All the good stuff. Of the actual birth we learn only the basics: It was time. The baby was born. We wrapped the baby in blankets. And that's pretty much it, folks.

If ever you wondered about who wrote Luke's Gospel, I think we can be pretty sure of one thing at least — this Gospel has to have been written by a man.

So since I'm the one who gets to reflect on this story right now, I want to fill in the picture and include some things a woman might remember if she was the one telling the story about a birth that changed the course of history.

As a nurse midwife myself, I've always been a little upset that no one ever includes the midwife in our nativity scenes. We always find Mary, Joseph, baby Jesus, shepherds, angels and royal wisdom figures — we find donkeys, cows, sheep, sometimes Santa Claus and every so often a little drummer boy — but do we ever find a midwife? No! Why not? No one seriously thinks that Joseph, as devoted as he was, actually delivered this baby do we?

In first century Palestine, it would have been inconceivable for a woman to give birth without the care and comfort of other women, and in particular the care of women the French call, sages-femmes — wise women — the French word for midwives.

Even though Mary and Joseph were far from home, hospitality was pretty much the prime directive for the peoples of Palestine who were not far removed from their own desert wondering days. So I'm guessing the innkeeper, or more probably his wife, saw Mary's plight and sent for the wise women of Bethlehem to come and tend to her.

As a first-time mom there were no guarantees that Mary would emerge from her ordeal alive. Death related to childbirth was much more common in the first century than today. Nearly everyone would have known cousins, wives, sisters, aunties and neighbors who had died giving birth or shortly thereafter.* And while Mary and Joseph may have been more optimistic than most — given biblical accounts of the reassuring mystical experiences surrounding Mary's pregnancy — this would still have been a very scary time for both of them.

As a midwife telling the story, I'd surmise that Mary's labor probably began en route to Bethlehem. For first pregnancies, pre-labor with irregular contractions can easily last several days with the regular contractions of latent labor lasting as long as 22 hours. Christmas cards aside, we don't really know that Mary was riding a donkey, in fact walking would have helped her labor progress.

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In Luke's story, Mary was probably well into her labor before finally finding shelter. When active labor arrived at last surely the midwives had also arrived to help Mary manage her rapid, excruciatingly painful contractions and to show Joseph just how to support her as she began the arduous effort of pushing the newborn Jesus into a waiting world and, more immediately, into the midwives' waiting arms.

We won't dwell on Mary's anguished cries, her sweat, her blood, or her tears — but I can tell you that when that baby Jesus appeared at last, there was no need for chanting angels, because the joy and wonder reflected in Mary and Joseph's faces, shown more brightly than any guiding star.

From a midwife's point of view all that heavenly host stuff is afterglow. The long-awaited child is born, Mary is safe, and Joseph as proud and relieved as any new dad trying not to faint over the intensity of watching his wonder woman wife give birth.

Mary labored long and well to birth a child who would be all about God's love everlasting. When he was old enough she would teach him the tenets of Judaism — summed up in her Magnificat hymn about a God who fills the hungry with good things and raises up the lowly. Her boy-child would become a man of peace who died a violent death even as he labored mightily himself to bring forth her Magnificat-God's justice-reign in the face of hatred.

My midwife's question for each of us this Christmas, is to ask in what way are we laboring, like Mary to birth God's abiding love into a world so much in need of it?

In what way are we, like Joseph, supporting the efforts of all who labor on behalf of the marginalized — refugees, the homeless poor or victims of sex-trafficking?

In what way are we, like the midwives, supporting our powerful birthing God, who longs for right relationship and protection of a Mother Earth that in fact, gave birth to us all?

**This story has been updated to remove an inaccurate figure and clarify the sentence following it.*

[St. Joseph Sr. Christine Schenk served urban families for 18 years as a nurse midwife before co-founding FutureChurch, where she served for 23 years. She holds

master's degrees in nursing and theology. This homily was first preached by Schenk in 2015. The video was made by Catholic Women Preach in 2016.]

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