

8th March 2020

Preacher: Jen Smith

Hymns: **357** **Jesus—the name high over all**
 333 **Majesty, worship his majesty**
 345 **And can it be that I should gain**

Readings: **Genesis 12:1-4a**
 Psalm 42
 John 3:1-17

“Call the midwife”

Holy God, break your word as bread for the feeding of our souls. And may the words of my lips and the meditation of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord our strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

Silence

For the last few years in the United Kingdom, there's been a lot of birth on our televisions on a Sunday night! In the series call the midwife, we first followed the work of nurse Jenny Leigh – the series was built from her actual diaries of being a nurse midwife in Poplar in the 1950s and 60s. Now of course the stories have moved on – we started in 1957 and it is now well into the 1960s - 1962 – Cuban missile crises, and independence movements – and through it all, we have journeyed week by week with friends and among the sisters of the Nonatus House Anglican convent, dedicated to the care of the women of Poplar. And there's a fashion, a sentimentality which the show disrupts, for clean linens and less plastic and push bikes. But I suspect at the heart of the show's popularity is birth itself - the possibility amidst the hard poverty of post war Poplar that the slate is wiped clean, that we begin again with each child, each mother. The Midwife is not the star of the birth. The main character is always the mother/father, and the child. The midwife leaves and moves on.

Today consider what it is to be born again as a child of god. You are the child Jesus will speak of.

The main character. But we also need midwives.... We will consider this a bit more as we open the scripture. And today we have temptation – great public temptation to fear, to hoard, to withdraw – and we need spiritual, political, economic midwives to help us resist.

Nicodemus the Pharisee came in the night to question Jesus, because he was disquieted, he was out of the comfort zone of his life as an observant Pharisee. We come in the day, but no less out of our comfort zones to hear Jesus say, 'you must be born again,' born from above.

1. What is it to be born again, to become again the child of god born of the spirit? I'm going to suggest it means we are delivered (born) out of two things and into one.

And that this birth puts us in a series of living relationships with God, the world and each other - not a static arrived moment of satisfied faith, but into living and growing relationships!

You are the child of God's late age - the apple of God's eye in scripture - we along with each human child and the creation itself are the main event, the long awaited in God's history and love.

As we heard in the verse at John 3.16 and 17: For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not die but shall have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.

Born again, born from above - out of two things, and into one.

First, when we are born again in Christ, we are born out of our home. We are delivered from narrow identification as the children of the country, the place and circumstance of our actual family and nation. We say this on the day when we celebrate Ghana's independence, and it is appropriate any day.

This does not mean I will ever be anything other than a white girl from the suburbs of 20th century America - but it means that Jesus' answer to the question, 'who is my neighbour,' is not just 'the one who agrees with you, or who has come to your faith and shares your experience and identity.' When Jesus is asked the question, who is my neighbour, he begins with loving the one who asked him, and ends with a story about a man set upon by thieves and found by a good Samaritan. Hear his answer!

It means that when John Wesley preaches about growth in holiness and good works, he is specific that spiritual growth involves not just service, but identifying with the ones least like me - crossing bounds of faith, of class, gender, and even to those who are not kind, but wish me harm. (Look up his sermons on Jesus' sermon on the mount - they read remarkably contemporary for something written mid 1700s - and they identify good works not just with charity but with our spiritual development - we don't get spirituality just by prayer and worship, Wesley says!)

We are born out of our specific place, our country, our skin colour - our experience of life. We become a bit queer as the world rates such things - Paul would talk about this as being not conformed to the world, but transformed by the holy spirit.

Now here is where it gets interesting - we do not leave our time, our place behind - it is still right to celebrate our homes, and we bring them into the wider story of God's love for the world. So that our celebration becomes complicated more than sentimental. Tells the story of our particular sin and redemption. Our particular suffering, or triumph, becomes through our re-birth in Christ part of the universal kingdom of God.

This is hard teaching - very we are delivered from the safety of the womb, the unique identity of our place in the world - into a world of light and noise, and threats - but freedom, and growth. We are delivered into a world where much public teaching contradicts the voice of scripture - where people from other nations are not always welcomed, and discussion about migration is tinged with cheap rhetoric that relies on fear of the foreign, not just economics. A young student was beaten on Thursday, on Oxford Street near Tottenham Court road, because a small group identified him

as Chinese, and attacked him for bringing Corona Virus. As if beating him would help?

Our rebirth leads to a moving, creative tension between our first homes and identity and that into which we grow, as Christian people - I will always be an American - I will always be a migrant person. I will always have had the family and experience and education and the particular knocks of my life which have made me what I am - and so will you. And what a creative mix we are, who are gathered here - How many homes and situations have born us. But we are born from that into something more, with each other.

I put it to you this aspect of being born again is more durable as a basis for peaceful living in a global society than mere tolerance of diversity, mere multiculturalism - but that's a topic for another day.

Secondly, we are born out of (delivered from) our particular time in history - into a household of God that stretches back and forwards in time. A river of love spoken of in scripture in the Revelation - the white robed of every time and place, those for whom every tear is wiped away, every valley lifted up.

In Genesis, Abraham promised adoption. And to be part of a family stretching back and forward. We are a part of that Covenant God made then - and we too journey on as he did.

Again, this does not mean we withdraw from our history, or say 'let bygones be bygones' to excuse the great sins of the past or present - but exactly the reverse - that the grief of history is offered into the whole groaning of creation, the salvation history of our God. The Psalms help us do this here - none more than the one we have today - to voice our anger and despair where it can be healed - before it can spill into hatred, or violence - to voice it, and convict it, and correct us. Next week we are going to have a Psalm that has horrible anger in it - being born again means being able to offer the worst excesses of our spirits to God, for God to work with us to reform and rebirth them.

This is relevant both for our personal lives, and our widest society - we would never say to someone bereaved 'because you are a Christian you should not feel grief.' Or to someone displaced by war and made a refugee, 'because you are a Christian you should be happy to lose the history of your culture, your family and life to an occupying army.' As if our circumstances should not matter for people of faith - and yet, as we are born again, we are born out of being defined solely by these particulars of our time and place - we bring the experience of them, sometimes very hard, into the full body of Christ and into God's kingdom.

We live in the creative tension as people born out of time, out of place - and into God's kingdom. Not closing us off or de valuing our history and identities, but offering them into a larger world - my father's house has many rooms, Jesus told his disciples on the night before he died, as told later in the Gospel according to John - a passage as appropriate to the beginning of life as its ending.

We are become more than ourselves alone, as we are born again.

Finally, if we are born out of place, born out of time - we are born into God's purpose, as we are born again.

We are born into painful awareness of this world's failings - we come to feel in our own bones, when we look at our own children and clean our own homes, shop for our own food, the pain of people who are beaten, who lose children to war, who are hungry or wasted.

We are born into an identification with each other's' pain, each other's' homes and cultures.

You are born into God's purpose of life, and life in all abundance. We are born beyond xenophobia, beyond the wounds history has dealt us, into the path of God's justice - and not just for our own land, but for South Sudan, Yemen, Syria, for Zimbabwe and Angola, for the United States.

Back to the midwives of Nonatus house, for whom the discipline of daily prayer, singing the Psalms lifted their own grief and tiredness in the ancient words of scripture. In the first series Sister Monica Jane offered Compline as the best remedy she had to Nurse Leigh in the time of her grief – when we have no words, the Psalms pray in us. Friends we need to pray, especially when we don't feel like it.

If we are in process of being born again, it will go easier for us to have midwives. People who stand alongside us and help us breathe through labour pains on our way - times when we have crises of confident or revisit long ago grief and find it as crippling as the first day - people who wait with us in the in between times, and encourage us that good things are coming! People to rejoice with us when new life comes, in our lives.

Every delivery does not end with a healthy baby. And we also need midwives for our personal journeys of life and faith, to stand with us when an ending comes and hope is dashed.

I would ask you to think of yourselves as each other's midwives - to consider what it would be for a church to be a midwife in its community - not the main character, but the one who stands alongside and acts sometimes very decisively - who acts for life and health. Not the star of the show, but accompanying our community in its growth and development. Involvement in community, caring, night shelter, Foodbank. But not just these things, good as they are, but also offering the voice of prayer, the voice of the Psalms, the identity in Christ which frees us from time, place, frees us for the purpose of abundant life here and in all times.

Stand together in these days of Lent, be midwives for each other as we are re-born in Christ