

CHRISTMAS EVE

DECEMBER 24, 2019

I once heard a pastor say “Every time a baby is born, it’s a sign that God wants us to go on.” I don’t remember which pastor I heard say it, I just remember that I don’t remember anything else they said that day. The idea took some thinking.

I grew up in the house of a lifelong believer in Jesus Christ and a scientist who came to faith later in life. My mom doesn’t remember a big conversion experience — she has always believed. My dad was baptized after I was born. And the conversations at our dinner table around theology and scripture could get pretty intense with two adults from those faith backgrounds.

So when I heard that what I thought of as a basic human bodily function — childbirth — was a sign from God that we were to continue — I had to have a Polchow dinner table conversation in my mind, by myself, and I didn’t hear the rest of the message.

Fast forward to my post-delivery appointment with the obstetrician. I’ve done it. And it didn’t feel basic at all. It felt complicated and scary and overwhelming. But it happened. The doctor told me it was very interesting for him to care for a pregnant pastor,

especially since I had been so very pregnant by the time I preached the Christmas season. He and I had talked some about faith during my appointments. He knew where I worked. I knew he didn’t like to go to church. He knew I preached that there is a good God, and that we are not it. I knew he struggled to believe that there was anything beyond us, that it was difficult for him to believe without proof.

He said to me that day, “The only thing that keeps the idea of God open for me, the only thing that keeps me wary of chucking faith completely, the only thing that makes me give in to my wife and go to church once or twice a year is that I know, as an obstetrician, as an expert of baby deliveries, how much of a miracle every child is.”

He said, “I don’t mean that in the Hallmark sort of way. I mean it as a scientist. When you look at the slim chances of conception, when you look at all the things that can go wrong before a mother even knows she is pregnant, when you look at all the things that can go wrong during pregnancy, it’s actually a very, very, very small percentage of pregnancies that make it to healthy, live birth of a baby. It’s almost impossible for

for this to work well. And yet, I am busy day after day, sometimes all day long, delivering babies.

And I repeated that phrase I'd heard years before, "Every time a baby is born, it's a sign that God wants us to go on."

"Yeah," he said. "It's like God wants us."

Yeah, it's exactly like God wants us.

God wanted the world to have a you. And a me. And the person next to you. The person behind you. The person in front of you. The person you're missing most. The person you can't wait to see this week. The person you're dreading seeing at dinner tomorrow. We were all pregnancies, we were all babies, we were all miracles, we all could have not happened. God wanted the world to have us. God wanted us. We are all a sign that God wanted the people of the day we arrived to go on.

This baby, the baby whose arrival we celebrate tonight and tomorrow — He was also a sign that God wanted people to go on. *"And this will be a sign for you: you will find a babe wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger."*

But this baby also signified a change in the way God wanted us to go on. This baby, Jesus, Emmanuel, God-with-us, was a sign that God wanted us to go on — knowing God's love. A love that was down to earth that God's very self came down to earth and real. A love that was so much for everyone that God made sure the baby was born to every day kind of people. Not kings and queens, but a carpenter and his fiancée from Nazareth. A love that is so complete, God made sure we knew the child was born in a low place so we would know God would be with us, even when we aren't at our best.

For centuries, babies had been born, babies had grown into children, children had grown into adults, and no where in there had they realized that they each mattered to this God that kept trying to reach out to them. So God came as a baby, who grew into a child, who grew into an adult who taught that everyone mattered to God. Mattered so much, He would die for them. And then live again.

These babies and then children and then adults had been counted in a number of censuses like the one Mary and Joseph were heading to in Bethlehem. But people didn't know they counted, really *counted*, until they knew God loved them. And this is the moment. This is the moment when we stop the hustle and bustle and just breathe in the fact of His birth. God wanted us to go on — knowing God's love. Knowing that human life matters this much to God — that God became one of us.

And here we are, celebrating the night that baby, that miracle came into the world. And we know it's not right. The world is not right. Things sit heavy on us. We love people who are not well. We know that in some way we are not well. We know the world is full of injustice and disharmony and broken systems and abuse and people who do not feel loved. And over at Cox or Mercy hospital, right now, a sign is coming that God wants us to go on. A baby is being born.

Here tonight, we celebrate a baby being born that lets us know that baby's life matters, that ours matters. That we are to go on. So here, in the deepest winter (What is it, 50 degrees outside?)... Here, in deepest winter, we get the message: Go on.

God wanted you. God wants you still. Go on and know you're loved. Go on. Amen.