

## The Darkness of the Womb ©

A Christmas Eve homily by Rev. Roberta Finkelstein

December 24, 2017

What exactly is the promise of Christmas that comes like an echo on the wind across the millennia? What is the basis for the thrill of hope that causes a weary world to rejoice? The promise is embedded in the ancient story that we retell year after year. But before we get to the story, let's look at the context. The story takes place during the reign of Emperor Augustus, the first Emperor, the man who is credited with Rome's transformation from a Republic to an Empire. He ushered in the Pax Romana, an era of unparalleled peace and prosperity. But at what cost? Like many dictators, Augustus maintained the façade of the Republic while he quietly and efficiently dismantled it. The census referred to in Luke was one of the building blocks in that process. An empire is, by definition, a large collection of states and nations ruled by a single, supreme authority. It was into this emerging empire that Jesus was born.

Born in the kingdom of Judea which was ruled by King Herod, whose appointment as "king" came from the Roman Emperor. (It is important to understand that he was appointed king rather than born king.) He was, according to many historians, a Jew in name only. His personal lifestyle was decadent. He was not observant. His greatest accomplishments were massive and luxurious building projects. He had a constant concern for his reputation; in fact, he set up a large cadre of secret police whose job was to constantly monitor the opinions expressed about him among the people he ruled. He prohibited public protest. It was into this kingdom that Jesus was born.

Born in Bethlehem, a small town in the hills of Judea. Not a center of economic or political power. But Bethlehem was a center of prophetic power. King

David was born there; some Hebrew prophets predicted that David's successor, the one who would restore Israel to her lost glory, would also come from Bethlehem

It was this child, born into a poor family further marginalized by the seeming irregularity of his conception, who was to become the true king of the Jews, a savior to his people. No wonder King Herod, already paranoid and more than a little narcissistic, was so threatened by the news. No wonder he tried to trick the Magi into revealing the location; he may have been paranoid, but he was right to fear the baby who would grow into the religious genius who would roundly condemn the oppressive injustice of the Augustinian empire and cast a vision of a kingdom vastly different from that of Herod.

I was a midwife before I went to seminary. Midwife means 'with woman'. Midwives believe that every baby comes in the fulness of time, that babies know how to be born, that women know how to give birth. Our job is to be present, to support, to trust and encourage. Breathe, we say. Then push.

We midwives have our own biblical heroines. Back in the days when the Israelites were enslaved in Egypt, the Pharaoh got it into his head that a male child born among them might present a threat to his rule. According to Exodus 1:15, "The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, whose names were Shiphrah and Puah, "When you are helping the Hebrew women during childbirth on the delivery stool, if you see that the baby is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, let her live." The midwives, however, feared God and did not do what the king of Egypt had told them to do; they let the boys live. Then the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and asked them, "Why have you done this? Why have you let the boys live?" The midwives answered Pharaoh, "Hebrew women are not like Egyptian women; they are vigorous and give birth before the midwives arrive." In other words, they

played on the King's ignorance and prejudice to save their people. Another story of common people thwarting empire.

So that brings me to around to the text for this homily – the Sikh Prayer for America written by Valerie Kaur. She reminds us that there have been many dark times in history, times when parents clutched their children to their chests, times when Josephs and Marys left behind all that they had and fled with their children to far-away places seeking safety. Times when the Empire was in ascendance, when despots more concerned with personal wealth and personal reputation ruled the land. And always into those times, a baby is born. Born to people of fierce persistence, of courage, of determination. Sometimes that baby is born to parents all alone in a stable; other times the baby is born into the hands of a brave midwife. The promise of Christmas is a baby will be born. Maybe we are those babies, born and now grown and ready to assume the mantle of prophecy. Maybe we are those midwives ready to support and nurture no matter the personal cost to us. Maybe we are the parents ready to do whatever it takes to insure a free and just future for our children.

Many of us are experiencing these as scary and challenging times. Kaur asks, “What if this darkness is not the darkness of the tomb, but the darkness of the womb? What if our America is not dead but a country still waiting to be born? What if the story of America is one long labor? What if all the mothers who came before us, who survived genocide and occupation, slavery and Jim Crow, racism and xenophobia and Islamophobia, political oppression and sexual assault, are standing behind us now, whispering in our ear: You are brave? What if this is our Great Contraction before we birth a new future? Remember the wisdom of the midwife: “Breathe,” she says. Then: “Push.”

The promise of the Christmas story is that empire never has the last word. The promise of the Christmas story is that salvation always comes from the margins. The promise of the Christmas story is that no matter the circumstances, we already have within us all that we need to survive and to thrive. In the fullness of time we breath through the pain. In the fullness of time we push back against oppression. In the fullness of time the Magi come to their senses and refuse to do the bidding of Herod.

Perhaps we are experiencing the great contraction that will give birth to a new era of freedom and justice, compassion and mercy. Remember, that beatific manger scene was preceded by the travail of a difficult journey and the painful contractions of labor. The shepherds were quaking with fear. Joseph was exhausted, Mary was in labor for some time under less than ideal conditions. And the serenity of the nativity only lasted a brief while before the family was forced to flee; another arduous journey. We don't know exactly where we are in our Christmas story, do we? All we know is that we can cling to that story as we make our own way in our own time. We cling to it as a reminder of perseverance as we breath, and as we push. And once again we feel that thrill of hope. And we rejoice.