

“A Savior is Born!”
Hebrews 2:10-18
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When I had my daughters, they were both born by C-section which meant that we got to stay in the hospital for a couple of extra days after they were born. I know most people don't think of a stay in the hospital as something that you “get to do-” as if it was a vacation- but in those first 48 hours after the girls were born, it did feel to me like a gift. I know it's not always easy for everyone in the first hours of a baby's life, but we were fortunate. The girls were both reasonably content those first couple of days and mostly slept, and I got to hold them and bond with them while the nurses took care of my needs and helped with the babies. It was a little window of time when I was able to simply bask in the joy of their arrival before going home where we had to deal with the challenges of learning how to nurse properly, and the babies days and nights being mixed up, and their newborn tummy aches that led to relentless crying, and exhaustion, and all the difficult parts of adjusting that come so soon after the babies make their entrance into this world.

On Wednesday night, we remembered the birth of the baby Jesus and celebrated his arrival. It's true that we do tend to romanticize the birth story, singing, “the little Lord Jesus, no crying he makes,” but there is something special about letting that night be like those first couple of days I enjoyed in the hospital with my newborn babies. Our focus is on receiving the baby, expressing our gratitude

to God, and basking in the warmth of the arrival of love in human form. This morning, those feelings of joy and gratitude carry over into our worship – that’s why we began with singing carols of praise about Jesus’s birth – but as soon as the first Sunday after Christmas, the lectionary texts for the day remind us that the baby that we have welcomed with joy wasn’t born to live an easy life, and even within those seemingly idyllic first hours and days of his life, he was immediately subjected to the experience of human suffering in a world living under the curse of sin and the shadow of death. Hebrews tells us that since the children – Jesus, the Son of God, and all of us, the sons and daughters of God - share flesh and blood – he himself, Jesus, shared the same things.

The birth narratives that we read in the Gospels don’t give any details about baby Jesus keeping his mother up all night because his newborn tummy was hurting from hunger, or gas pains, but he was a real human baby which means he did experience the same kinds of discomfort that all human babies experience. The narrative in Matthew *does* tell us about the way that Jesus and his family found themselves in danger during his infancy because a jealous and violent King Herod was frightened by the news that another king had been born. Herod ordered a mass killing of the babies in and around Bethlehem, and Jesus and his family escaped to Egypt because an angel appeared to Joseph in a dream and warned him of the danger. It’s an awful story to read, but it shows that right from the start Jesus’s birth was a threat to the powers of this world and that the road that he would travel as he obeyed God’s call on his life would be filled with opposition, danger, and personal pain. Jesus, from the time he took

his first breaths up until the time he breathed his last on the cross, was not exempt from suffering but participated in it and shared fully in our humanity.

I do find it comforting to know that Jesus can sympathize with us in our weakness and that when I am experiencing something difficult or painful, he truly understands what I'm going through. I am reminded that Jesus himself learned to trust God when he had to endure hard things, and I ask for his help as I try to learn to do the same. As it said in our Scripture in verse 18, because he was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help us. That is the comforting part of having a Savior who has shared our human experience, but at the same time, there have always been people who struggle with the idea of a "suffering Savior." It doesn't seem very Savior-like, after all.

Saviors should be strong, powerful, warrior-like heroes, and it's an understandable idea. Imagine that you're out in the ocean drowning. You want to know that the lifeguard on duty is a strong swimmer who will easily be able to rescue you from the waves. Or imagine you're the victim of the school's biggest bully. You want the strongest guy in school to come to your rescue, not one of the other kids who is constantly getting picked on by the same bully. In the first century, there was a heresy that rose up because people found it difficult to accept the idea of a Savior who was also subject to suffering. The heresy was called *Docetism*. Docetism denied the full humanity of Jesus and said that he only *seemed* to suffer. When he was subjected to the soldier's beatings and when he was crucified on

the cross, it looked painful, but they denied that his suffering was real in the way human suffering is real.

The idea of a suffering Savior may go against our instincts about how a Savior ought to save us, but the author of Hebrews tells us that this is the mysterious and wonderful way that God has chosen to save us. Rather than standing over or apart from suffering, and rather than causing more suffering by fighting violence with violence or evil with evil, God's plan was to become human and bear the pain that sin has caused as he lived his life. What is unique about Jesus is that he trailblazed the way through the temptations and the pain and made it through to the other side without ever giving in to the temptations and without ever failing in his obedience to God. This is why Hebrews calls him the "pioneer" of our salvation.

In his commentary on Hebrews, NT Wright describes Jesus as the pioneer of our salvation this way. "Imagine an explorer cutting his way deep into the jungle. Nobody has been this way before; there are no paths, no trails, no signs that it's possible to go this way. Yet on he goes, forging his way through impossible terrain, until he reaches the goal. Once he's done that, others can follow...The jungle was the whole world of suffering, pain, sin and death. Nobody had ever gone through there before and come out the other side. When he did it, he opened the way into God's new world..."¹ Hebrews tells us that by doing this and through his sacrifice, he became the atonement for our sins – our salvation.

¹ N. T. Wright, *Hebrews for Everyone* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 19.

Humankind is prone to believing the lie that it's possible to fight evil with evil. It's why wars are fought, and why we return insults with insults, and why we relish the idea of giving others "a taste of their own medicine." In truth, all this behavior is just a reflection of our human sin and sickness and a sign that we have lost our way and misunderstand what real power is, but Jesus, the Light of the World, exposes the lie, and shows us that the power that truly saves us, and changes us, and leads us straight into God's new world is love. NT Wright says other pioneers and explorers forge through obstacles and blaze new trails for fame, or fortune, or curiosity, but the thing that compelled Jesus, the pioneer of our salvation, is love. Love is what motivated him to keep going and empowered him to endure the most powerful weapon that the Ruler of this world could wield against him which was death. He endured all the way through, and God vindicated him by raising him from the dead and breaking the power of death once and for all.

On this first Sunday of Christmas, this is the good news that we continue to celebrate. We began with a celebration of his birth, a cherished and holy event, but the baby grew up and it's the life that he went on to live and what he accomplished through the life he lived in the flesh that confirms the truth of the message that the angels proclaimed to the shepherds: a Savior has been born for us. We might not feel ready to leave the sweet and peaceful manger scene so quickly like I wasn't ready to leave the hospital haven after my C-sections, but the world can't wait, and we can't wait, for the salvation that Jesus has won for us.

During the weeks leading up to Christmas there's always a part of me that feels like everything should just be right for a few weeks so that we can celebrate Christmas without all of the usual inconveniences and sadnesses that make life hard, but it doesn't work that way. Wars continue to rage on. Interpersonal conflicts remain unresolved. People are still hungry and homeless. Loved ones still die, but even though we don't get a full reprieve yet, Christmas does come anyway. God comes right into the mess with us to deal with it- the evil, the sickness, the injustice, the pain - to save us from all of it. A Savior has been born to us! Amen.

Hebrews 2:10-18

It was fitting that God, for whom and through whom all things exist, in bringing many children to glory, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through sufferings. ¹¹ For the one who sanctifies and those who are sanctified all have one Father. For this reason Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters, ¹² saying,

“I will proclaim your name to my brothers and sisters;
in the midst of the congregation I will praise you.”

¹³ And again,

“I will put my trust in him.”

And again,

“Here am I and the children whom God has given me.”

¹⁴ Since, therefore, the children share flesh and blood, he himself likewise shared the same things, so that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, ¹⁵ and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death. ¹⁶ For it is clear that he did not come to help angels but the descendants of Abraham. ¹⁷ Therefore he had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people. ¹⁸ Because he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested.