

19 December 2010
Advent 4
The Holy Baptism of Amber Mae Biel

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Birth is Still a Miracle”

Text: Matthew 1:18-25

(This sermon is a reprise from six years ago, with some very slight modifications. Having been sick all week, I was happy to see that this sermon fit the occasion.)

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

Not too long ago, when a baby was born people would say things like “the miracle of life,” or “the miracle of birth.” But not so much anymore. The wonder of birth has been tempered these days. Having a child is looked upon now not so much as a miracle, but as a choice – something that *I* decided and *I* did. It doesn’t even have to be “we” anymore. All the medical science and technology being used these days has changed the miracle and wonder of birth into something rather cold and clinical. In vitro fertilization, artificial insemination, and genetic engineering seek to leave nothing to chance, and who knows what new - and frightening - developments the future will bring.

And so Advent and Christmas is, in a way, very comforting, as it reminds us that birth is still a miracle, and life is still a matter of creation and in the hands of God – no matter what we think we can do. If God didn’t allow it or permit it, all the science in the world couldn’t create a single life. God is still God, as much as we – following in the footsteps of Adam and Eve – would like to be!

And so the Holy Gospel today. A miraculous birth. We’ve heard of one of these already this Advent – the birth of John the Baptist was miraculous as well. Elizabeth and Zechariah were both old and beyond child-bearing years, and even more than that, Elizabeth was barren. Yet the Lord of life caused life to appear, opening Elizabeth’s womb and causing John, the forerunner of Christ, to be born. . . . And six months later, God does it again, this time not with an old lady beyond child-bearing years, but with a young maiden, a virgin, named Mary. A miraculous birth.

But today we heard not so much of Mary, but of Joseph and his reaction to news of this birth. And as we heard, *Joseph isn’t thinking miraculously* – he’s much like us. He first thinks scientifically, and therefore thinks that Mary has been unfaithful to him and thinks of divorce. But this is no ordinary birth. This is a miraculous birth.

And so the angel Gabriel comes to Joseph, to comfort and reassure him, and tell him what has taken place. The hand of God has been at work here. The Holy Spirit has come to Mary. She has not been unfaithful, but in fact, the very opposite – *she has shown great faith in God*, and is now the mother of the Lord. Do not be afraid, Joseph. This is a miraculous birth for you and all the world. For this child, whom you will name Jesus, **“will save His people from their sins.”** . . . And this Word of God works faith in Joseph’s heart. He believes and becomes the guardian of our Lord.

Now the early church fathers, in considering these two miraculous births, also then thought of another – and that is the miraculous new birth that we witnessed this morning for little Amber, and that takes place for each of us in the waters of Holy Baptism. That, it turns out, is the focus of much of their Christmas preaching. For they knew that the Word of God that created faith and miraculous births in Elizabeth and Mary also does the same for us today. Or as Luther put it in the Small Catechism: *“Without God’s Word the water is just plain water and no Baptism. But with the Word of God it is a Baptism, that is, a life-giving water, rich in grace, and a washing of the new birth in the Holy Spirit.”* Or in other words, the Word of God gives life. And where the Word of God is, there is miraculous birth.

But the question for you and I today is: *do we believe this?* Or have we become like Joseph in our thinking, and begun thinking a bit too scientifically – not just about physical life, but about faith and new life and God’s work in the church? That is an important question, because many today think of and regard the church scientifically. That if we just do the right things, or have the right programs, or get the people in our area figured out, that that will bring them in, and they’ll be born again, right? And there is some big money being made in this rather cold and clinical and scientific approach to the church.

And so Advent and Christmas and the miraculous births of John and Jesus - and Amber! - can help us today, and re-orient our thinking, and remind us once again **that birth is still a miracle**. And that just as there would be no physical life apart from God, so too would there be no spiritual life apart from God. We can sell the church, and make it look attractive, and do everything “right” – but even so, our new birth of faith in Christ is still a miracle. And no less a miracle than that birth that took place in Bethlehem some 2000 years ago. For our new birth and life of faith is also the work of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit coming to us through the Word of God and creating life. Before He does so, we are dead in our trespasses and sins (Eph 2:1) and are incapable of doing anything for ourselves spiritually. But when the Spirit comes, there is life. Life in an old, barren woman’s womb, life in a young virgin’s womb, and life in our cold, stony, sinful hearts. Your birth and my birth here in faith are miraculous births, as we are born as children of God.

And just as God provided a father and mother to take of His Son Jesus, so too has He provided for us. He has provided the Church as our mother, to take care of us, to raise us and feed us with His Word and His forgiveness and His food, the very body and blood of our Saviour, that we might grow in faith and knowledge and grace. And He has provided pastors to be our guardians, to protect us from the dangers of false teaching, and to nurture and guide and teach. . . . Now, if we think that our spiritual life is somehow *our* doing, then these we will probably reject, and seek to go out on our own, and take care of ourselves. But if we know that our life is from God, a miraculous birth worked by our Heavenly Father, through His Son, by the power of the Spirit, then these we will instead embrace, seeing them as gifts of God for our good. Seeing them as God's way of caring for us – in this world, now, through means, through earthly things, until He calls us home to live as His sons and daughters in His heavenly Kingdom.

Thinking in that way gives us a whole new perspective on Christmas. Christmas is not just about Jesus and history. It's about His birth **for** me. His birth **in** me. My birth in Him. It is about the Son of God becoming a Son of Man, that we sons of men might become sons of God. It's about the fact that all matters of life and death are in the hands of our Heavenly Father. And that miraculous births are then followed by miraculous resurrections. As it was for Jesus, so too it will be for you and me. For just as His miraculous birth shows us our miraculous birth, so too His resurrection from the dead has provided for us our resurrection from the dead. For as the angel told Joseph, ***“He will save His people from their sins.”*** And if we are saved from our sins, then we are also saved from the penalty of our sins, which is death. And if we are saved from death, then though we will die, we cannot stay dead. We will rise as Jesus rose, and live as He lives, and live in His Kingdom, which has no end.

And so ***“when Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him.”*** The Word of God took root in his heart and gave faith. And so too you and me. For as God sent His Word to Joseph, so also has He sent His Word to us, to take root in our hearts and give faith. And so we too now do as we are commanded. Not because we have to, but like Joseph, we do so in love. We do so in grace and gratitude. We do so because God never just commands – He always also gives. . . . And so we do what the Lord has told us to do. We hear His Word. We confess and repent. We receive His forgiveness. We come to His altar to receive His communion in His body and blood. We give Him thanks and praise. We pray. We speak. We love. We give. We care. And we call on His name – Jesus – for He has saved *me* from *my* sins.

And that's really what Christmas is all about. That Son, that name, the reason for that birth. Scientifically, clinically, what happened in Bethlehem, and what happened here today at this font, makes no sense at all. But Christmas is not about

science or possibilities. It is about a miraculous birth. For ***“behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call His name Immanuel (which means, God with us).”*** And God is with us still. Still creating life. Still giving us life, both physical and spiritual. Still accomplishing what He came to do: save His people from their sins. And you have been saved. He is born for you.

In the Name of the Father and of the (+) Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.