

Labor of Love

Luke 2:1-7 and others

Series: Contemporary Christian Christmas Carols 2021

Preaching Date: December 24, 2021

Worship: O Little Town

Key Sentence: Jesus' poverty and loving pain are foreshadowed in Bethlehem.

Outline:

Verse 1: You could hear a woman cry (Luke 2:1-7)

Chorus: It was a labor of pain (Mark 15:33-34)

Verse 2: Calloused hands and weary eyes (Matthew 1:18-25)

Chorus: It was a labor of love (1 John 4:10)

Luke 2:1–7 In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. ²This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria. ³And all went to be registered, each to his own town. ⁴And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, ⁵to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. ⁶And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. ⁷And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

Mark 15:33–34 And when the sixth hour had come, there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour. ³⁴And at the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, “Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?” which means, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

Matthew 1:18–25 Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. ²⁰But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, “Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. ²¹She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” ²²All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: ²³“Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel” (which means, God with us). ²⁴When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife, ²⁵but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus.

1 John 4:10 In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.

Andrew Peterson / Jill Philips, Texts: Luke 2:1-7, Matthew 1:18-25

It was not a silent night
There was blood on the ground
You could hear a woman cry
In the alleyways that night
On the streets of David's town
And the stable was not clean
And the cobblestones were cold
And little Mary full of grace
With the tears upon her face
Had no mother's hand to hold

It was a labor of pain
It was a cold sky above
But for the girl on the ground in the dark
With every beat of her beautiful heart
It was a labor of love

Noble Joseph by her side
Callused hands and weary eyes
There were no midwives to be found
On the streets of David's town
In the middle of the night
So he held her and he prayed
Shafts of moonlight on his face
But the baby in her womb
He was the maker of the moon
He was the Author of the faith
That could make the mountains move

For little Mary full of grace
With the tears upon her face
It was a labor of love

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Labor of Love

Luke 2:1-7 and others

What has been the greatest moment of your life? I'm sure each of us could name a few. Maybe it was the moment you came to faith in Jesus. Maybe it was the moment you got married. Maybe it was an academic or athletic moment. I've had some of those moments. Well, not athletic. I don't do those. But some of these others could be candidates for my greatest moment. Yet if you ask me, I'm certain to say that one of the greatest moments of my life happened on December 22nd, 1989. Many of you have heard this story, but I like to tell it.

In 1986 I left Exxon to start my own company, CodeCalc. The company did pretty well, for a little thing run out of my living room. But it wasn't long before I felt led by God to become a pastor. We planned to move to Illinois in the fall of 1988 but early in the year we discovered that Gail was pregnant. So, being somewhat rational, we decided we would put off seminary for a year, and go in the fall of 1989. Well, early in that year, we discovered Gail was pregnant again. Not really planned, but very welcome. By this time I didn't want to delay seminary another year. Neither did Gail, really, so in the summer of 1989 we moved to Illinois and in the fall I started seminary.

The baby was due late in December. My first seminary finals week was December 13th to the 19th, so we really hoped the baby would wait till that was done, and she did. But that same week we had a cold front. In Illinois. It was twenty below. For the high. On the 20th Gail seemed to be going into labor. The midwife came out from Chicago, quite a drive. And labor stopped. She said "go take a walk maybe it'll start again." So we took a walk in twenty below zero weather, on Diamond Lake, which was frozen. But labor didn't restart. The next day we had a power failure. Spent the whole day with our three kids, in the kitchen, baking to keep warm. Fortunately the power came on that evening, because sometime well after midnight Gail got up, made a routine trip to the bathroom and realized she was in labor.

Now a home birth was the plan all along. And we were nearly ready. We had to get the mattress out of the pull-out-couch cause you can't give birth on a water bed. The plan was to put it on the floor in the living room, which meant right next to and under the Christmas tree. Pretty romantic. But the first step was to call the mid-wife. She said "I'll come as fast as I can, but I'm not sure my car will start, and there's ice on the roads. It's going to take a while." We called the back-up midwife. She said "our vehicles will not start at this temperature."

So, we called a nurse whose husband Glen went to seminary with me, and she said, “Well, I can come, but I don’t want to leave Glen home. We were at the hospital and his father passed away this evening.” I said “Cheryl, just stay and take care of yourselves. It’s ok.” At that point we realized we were probably having this baby by ourselves. Which was not the crisis it would be for some people. We were having a home birth anyway, and it was our fourth baby, our third home birth, and we’d had a lot of birth preparation over the years.

But it was kind of a circus for a little while, trying to get this mattress out and pillows and pads and towels, and every three minutes Gail was having a serious contraction. When a contraction started, I would kneel down and she would put her arms around my neck and lean on me and she’d work through the contraction and the pain, and when the contraction let up she’d say “go” and I would run off to do the next step of preparation. It all went really fast.

By the time she was set up on the mattress and leaning against the entertainment system she was about ready to deliver. It was not more than an hour and a half since that routine trip to the bathroom. About two contractions later Ruth Carol Noelle DeGray was born into my hands. As I recall it was very peaceful. She gave one or two squawks to let us know everything was working and then settled down to sleep in her mother’s arms. Eventually the midwife and a bunch of other people showed up. But that birth experience and that just-us time was and always will be a high point of my life.

Most of the time when I hear the song that is our theme song tonight, “Labor of Love,” by Andrew Peterson, I at least think of that cold December night when Gail labored through the pain to bless us with our child. As we briefly look at Andrew Peterson’s song tonight we want to see that Bethlehem was more than a birth story. Jesus’ poverty and loving pain were foreshadowed in Bethlehem.

Let’s begin with Luke’s birth narrative which is very evocative but not very detailed. Luke 2:1–7 *In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. ²This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria. ³And all went to be registered, each to his own town. ⁴And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, ⁵to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. ⁶And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. ⁷And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.*

Notice what this Scripture does not say. It does not say this was a stable or a cave. It could have been the ground floor of a relative's house. It was not unusual to keep some animals in the house and thus to have a manger, a feeding trough on the ground floor. But it could also have been a freestanding stable, or a cave used as a stable. We don't know. The Scripture doesn't mention any particular animals. Sheep? Ox? Donkey? We don't know. The Scripture doesn't mention that it was winter, or that it was cold. Opinions vary as to whether would have even been in the fields in December. Most people who look at it conclude that it was probably more like September. We don't know.

Finally, the Scripture doesn't mention that Jesus was born at night. Though many babies are. There are physiological reasons for that. Three out of four of our birth children were born late at night or early in the morning after a laboring at night. The text also doesn't say that it was a silent night. If you've helped at a birth you probably know that most mothers do not labor in silence. It's a painful process, and most mothers cry out when the pains get severe. I don't remember Gail crying out much but that's probably because I was right there crying with her. But there was that one night when my daughter Abbie was giving birth to her first-born, Elaine. I did not attend the birth, but I was trying to sleep in the next room. I didn't sleep, but I lay there praying and listening with tears to the cries of my child as she gave birth to her child. It was not a silent night.

This is exactly where Andrew Peterson begins "Labor of Love." "It was not a silent night. There was blood on the ground. You could hear a woman cry. In the alleyways that night. On the streets of David's town." The song brings us into the picture in a realistic way, foregoing the haloed idealism that so often accompanies the depictions of the nativity.

And the stable was not clean

And the cobblestones were cold

And little Mary full of grace

With the tears upon her face

Had no mother's hand to hold

Notes:

(1) The worship theme is "O Little Town." Christmas Eve – nuff said.

Key song: “Labor of Love,” by Andrew Peterson. As we discussed, if we can get Megan (or maybe Suzanne if Megan can’t do it) to do this as a solo, it would be good.

- (2) There is no specific prayer time or communion on Christmas Eve.
- (3) The Scripture at the start of worship will be chosen to go along with the songs, but will probably include parts of the texts chosen for this week.
- (4) The Children’s Corner will be “What did Jesus get for Christmas?”
- (5) The sign will be “the greatest became least for us Philippians 2:7” This is really a verse from the Sunday message, but we can put it up the whole week.
- (6) The visual theme will be “Nativity” This can be art and drawings, but also good pictures of nativity scenes (with statues, etc).