

Every once in a while a sermon seems to strike a nerve - the preacher may never be quite sure why, but sometimes people want to talk about the topic weeks, if not months later. Several years ago the text for a Sunday in Advent was: Prepare the Way of the Lord! and I thought that would be a good reason to talk about the fine art of wall papering.

Actually, it wasn't so much about wallpapering as about the first line of instructions that come with the wallpaper - it always says simply, step 1: Prepare the wall.

Apparently a lot of people have done wall papering in this town because they readily understood my point that such a few words - prepare the wall - can potentially be fraught with weeks, if not months, of difficulty and frustration.

What if the old wall paper doesn't want to come off?

What if it wants to come off but brings the old plaster along with it?

What sins and shortcuts of past generations lie just beneath those few layers of paper that had you left well enough alone would never have come home to haunt you? But you followed the instructions - prepare the wall - and now those sins and shortcuts come back to waste your time, try your patience, and destroy your positive frame of mind. Perhaps paneling wasn't such a bad idea!

Anyway, I am not going to talk about wall-papering tonight, but it did occur to me that there is a line in our traditional Christmas story that is very much like "prepare the wall" because it sounds so easy when you say it, but everyone with experience knows that an unknown measure of effort and a multitude of risks are contained in just a few words.

In the Christmas story those words are: And she gave birth to her firstborn son.

I take the brevity of that description as evidence that a man wrote this Gospel. I have heard women discuss giving birth and I think we would have gotten more detail had the text been written by a woman - "she gave birth to her firstborn son" sounds like a description written by somebody who left the room, or in this case the manger. It raises some questions.

Was Mary alone with Joseph when she gave birth? Were there others who helped her with the labor and delivery? Are there certain key characters who have been excluded from innumerable narrations of the nativity story and countless crèches in churches and Christian homes?

Many years ago I heard a sermon that struck a nerve with me - I've never forgotten it. It was delivered by the Rev. James Forbes, who was at that time the newly installed Senior Pastor of the Riverside Church in New York City. He was talking about Shiphrah and Puah as models for Christian leadership.

I hate to admit this, but when he first mentioned them, I could not place Shiphrah and Puah - I couldn't think of a holiday where children dress up as Shiphrah and Puah and have a church play. Who were these people?

It turns out, they were very important characters in the Bible - without them we probably wouldn't even have a Bible, since they saved the iconic hero who is given credit for writing the books of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy - the Torah, the foundation upon which Judaism and Christianity are built.

Shiphrah and Puah show up in the book of Exodus - chapter 1, verse 15: The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other Puah, "When you act as midwives to the Hebrew women, and see them on the birth stool, if it is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, she shall live." But the midwives feared God; they did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but they let the boys live.

It was Shiphrah and Puah, then, who saved a certain baby boy from being killed at his birth. His mother hid him for three months and then placed him in a papyrus basket and set him afloat in the reeds alongside the river. The daughter of Pharaoh came to bathe and saw the basket and took the child as her own - and she named him Moses.

Without Shiphrah and Puah, how could you have the story of God bringing the people of Israel out of Egypt, out of the land of bondage?

A few years ago the National Geographic channel did a series called Science of the Bible. They tried to imagine what the birth of Jesus was like. They first said that the idea we have of the inn and the manger are based on modern concepts where inn-keeping is a business and humans and animals inhabit separate spaces. In the days when Jesus was born most travelers stayed in an extra room in a private home, possibly a relative's home, and those homes had an upper story for people and a lower area for animals.

They further said that because she was poor, Mary probably did not have a birthing stool, the choice of wealthy women at that time. She had a midwife and delivered standing up, leaning against the midwife's assistants, who helped with the pushing by massaging Mary's abdomen. Joseph, no doubt, waited nervously outside.

The midwives made certain the baby was in a good position for birth, they caught the baby, cut the umbilical cord, washed the baby, salted the baby, and wrapped the baby in swaddling clothes. Then they went out to tell Joseph he was a father, and disappeared beyond the pages of the story.

These women who assisted in the birth of Jesus are like many critical players in God's plan of salvation - un-named, un-known, yet absolutely essential for the birth of God's kingdom of righteousness and peace. In this case, the men may have written the story, but the women made it happen.

Scripture speaks to us of a light that shines in the darkness. That light is the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. Each of us is called to reflect a bit of that light into the darkness of our world. We don't bring the light into being - we are more like the midwives, whether known like Shiphrah and Puah, or unknown like those who assisted Mary in the manger.

Each of us is called to be a midwife to righteousness and peace in our relationships, in our community, and in our world. Although it may sound simple, it is not accomplished without great labor and even a measure of suffering. That is why Paul wrote:

I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God... We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now...

The labor of creation is not yet completed - there is still great work to be done to prepare the way of the Lord. Tonight, tomorrow, certainly soon each of us will be faced with decisions and opportunities to be self-serving or to serve others, to do what is of God or to do what is of the darkness.

As we think about Mary and those who helped her in all the risk and effort of giving birth to her firstborn son - let us remember a familiar prayer, with a little twist.

Lord, make me a midwife of Thy peace;
where there is hatred, give birth to love;
where there is injury, pardon;
where there is doubt, faith;
where there is despair, hope;
where there is darkness, light;
and where there is sadness, joy.
For it is in giving that we receive,

it is in pardoning that we are pardoned,
it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.