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Nativity: A Philosophy of Birth

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In the years after Jesus, significant parts of the Christian tradition began to move away from a focus on his *life* and *teachings* to debates over the meaning of his *death*. A famous distillation of this shift is found in a line from T. S. Eliot's poem "Journey of the Magi." Eliot imagines the magi asking themselves a question about why they had followed a fabled star to visit a child:

Were we led all that way for

Birth or Death?

Christmas offers the answer that the magi were led all that way for *birth*. The celebration of Christmas is all about an incarnation, literally, an enfleshment. It's the story of a baby who grew up to be one among many examples in the world's religions of what it looks like when the divine powerfully manifests in an *embodied* human life.

Many celebrations of Easter emphasize and give the opposite answer: the magi were led all that way for *death*. But if you want a more complete "UU take" on that, you'll have to come back in March for Easter Sunday.

The upshot of this shift of emphasis — from birth to death — is that, over the years, the Christian tradition has become most famously symbolized by a *cross*, a symbol which has become problematic for a number of reasons. (For more, see my previous sermon on "The Life Tradition Versus The Death Tradition In Christianity.") But each December, Christmas challenges us to consider whether a more important

symbol of Christianity might be the *crèche*, the scene of Jesus' birth. *Were we led all that way for / Birth or Death?*

Since Magin and I have a six-month-old at home, I've been thinking a lot about birth this Christmas. And in preparation for this Christmas Eve service, I've been reading a recently published book titled *Natality: Toward a Philosophy of Birth* by Jennifer Banks, an editor at Yale University Press. She makes a really interesting argument — quite appropriate for Christmas — that we humans should focus at least as much (if not more) on *natality* and birth as we do on mortality and death.

On the one hand, many wise (mostly male) philosophers, theologians, and sages have challenged us to consider that *remembering our own mortality* can be an important motivation for making the most of our finite lives. On the other hand, Banks argues that from a feminist perspective, we are missing an equally deep well of wisdom if we fail to reverse our perspective and also remember our *natality*, our birth.

Consider these examples of what it might look like to flip the script on some of the traditional proverbs about mortality, and focus instead on natality. As I read, notice if one or more of Banks' prompts emphasizing *birth* resonate with you in particular. That might be a sign that there is some wisdom therein for you this Christmas:

- From the time we are born, we are being shaped by *birth*.
- Study *birth* always; it takes an entire lifetime to learn how to *give birth* or to come to terms with our *having been born*.
- Keep *birth* daily before your eyes.
- *Birth* is evidence of our freedom.
- The fundamental purpose of art is to process the strange, painful, and miraculous experience of *birth*.
- The great philosophers are those who practice *being born* and *birthing*.

(6)

Keep in mind that natality is not only about *literally* giving birth, but also *metaphorically*, about acts of creativity, invention, and nurturing. In this sense, “we give birth when we create with our hands, offer hospitality, work for justice, or teach a child. We share in giving birth whenever we freely offer ourselves for healing, for

delight, for transformation, for peace,” and so much more (Jan Richardson, “Midwives in the Process”).

Banks’ book *continues* by exploring the theme of natality in the works of Hannah Arendt, Friedrich Nietzsche, Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Shelley, Sojourner Truth, Adrienne Rich, and Toni Morrison (201). Check this book out if this brief sermon leaves you curious to learn more.

For tonight, I will share with you only a few reflections from Hannah Arendt, one of the most influential political philosophers of the 20th century. Arendt coined the term *natality*. And her original meaning was also about much more than whether or not someone has a child. Arendt herself chose not to have children.

As a philosopher who studied how to resist oppressive political movements, Arendt emphasized natality as a reminder that no matter how bad things get, we humans “are always capable of *beginning again*, of starting something *new*.” There is tremendous hope and potential inherent in natality, potential which is freshly available to each of us in the *birth* of each new present moment. For Arendt, this shift of emphasis made natality “the most prized” of all our human capabilities (8).

This Christmas — and in the coming new year — I invite you to consider what wisdom and inspiration there might be for you in *natality*:

- Study *birth* always; it takes an entire lifetime to learn how to come to terms with our *having been born*.
- *Birth* is evidence of our freedom.
- Practice *being born* and *birthing*.

Of course, Christmas is ultimately about much *more* than the birth of *Jesus*. As we sang for our Chalice Lighting words, one of the deeper meanings of Christmas is that, “*Each night* a child is born is a holy night” (Sophia Lyon Fahs). With *each birth* — very much including our own — “something uniquely new came into the world.” And in every new present moment, we have an opportunity for a little *rebirth* — a chance to nudge ourselves, others, and the world toward just a little — or a lot — more hope or love or peace or joy (45).

Don’t get me wrong: there’s *room at the inn* for all the other emotions — whether positive, negative, and everywhere in between. “To everything there is a season.” *And*

in this Christmas season, when we are invited to remember how the birth of a tiny baby came to change the world in unexpected ways — may even just a little more peace, hope, love, and joy be born in you this night and in the days to come.