

It’s no coincidence that this story about Mary and Joseph and Jesus always reminds me of my first week as a parent. It was November 30, 2009. My daughter Lillian had been born three days earlier. Those first three days in the hospital were blissful. We were fortunate enough to have a fairly easy delivery. We made it to the hospital in plenty of time. There were mild labor pains, and then there were major ones. Moira breathed through her labor pains just like she’d been told to, and I did whatever Moira asked of me, just like I’d been told to, and Lillian came forth, full of grace and beauty. Friends came to visit, the grandparents flew in from out-of-town, and for a few hours every day the nurse offered to take the baby to the nursery so we could sleep. But then, after three days, the doctor told us we could take Lillian home, and that’s when it hit me: I hope we remember what the nurse told us about how to treat diaper rashes; I hope the house is big enough; I hope that swing we bought does what it’s supposed to do. You know the one. It comes in a box with a big sticker on it that says, “Easy to assemble.” It had only 57 pieces, 9 screws, and 12 decals, but the directions promised that if properly assembled, it could put a baby to sleep, and that meant I’d get to sleep, too.

So, on our first day home from the hospital with Lillian, we tried out that swing, and let me tell you, it didn’t work. It didn’t work in the living room. It didn’t work in the kitchen. It didn’t work at 7 p.m. or at 3 a.m. No matter how fast I made that darn swing swing, most of the time, it didn’t do what I wanted it to do. Because Lillian was like most every other baby out there. At times, she would just cry uncontrollably, and pee and poop uncontrollably.

I will admit, in my first few weeks of fatherhood, there were many times when I would stare at Lillian and wonder: Whose child are you really? I will admit, there are times when I still ask this question. I think it’s a fair question to ask. In fact, I think it’s a question Mary and Joseph must have asked about Jesus. Did you notice that Luke says nothing about Jesus and his first 7 days on earth? We hear all about his birth and how it came to be. Of how an angel named Gabriel came and announced to his young, virgin mother that she was going to have a baby. Of how that baby would be named Jesus, the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God would give him the throne of his ancestor David, and he will reign over

the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end. Of how this young virgin, who never asked to be pregnant, almost had to go it alone because her husband-to-be wanted a divorce. Of how, just shortly before her water broke, she and Joseph had to travel on foot to Bethlehem, where there was no room in the inn. Of how, on the night her baby was born, Mary had to lay him in a feeding trough, mixed in with cows and horses and donkeys. Of how her only visitors were a bunch of shepherds who must have smelled of manure. There was no private hospital room, no sanitary precautions, no epidural. And to think, this whole thing was God's doing! If my wife's pregnancy and delivery were by the books, Mary's pregnancy and delivery were off the charts. Nothing about it was easy to assemble. But Mary goes along with it. Actually, she doesn't just go along with it. We're told she praises God for it, blesses God for looking upon her—a poor girl—with favor. She sings of a God who stages a revolution on the world, who brings the powerful down from their thrones and lifts up the lowly.

Did you notice, though, that Luke says nothing about Jesus and his first 7 days on earth? The story of his birth ends in verse 20 with the shepherds leaving Bethlehem and returning home and verse 21 announces that it is 8 days later and time to circumcise Jesus. So what happened in those 7 days in between? I'll tell you what happened. Mary went home to discover that post-pregnancy stinks. Everything aches. You can't lean over and pick up your baby without fear of tearing something somewhere, you can barely walk, and the swing you put together to keep the baby from crying, it doesn't work. No matter that your baby is named Lillian or Jesus Son of the Most High, all they do is poop, scream, and deprive you of sleep and floor space. Have a baby and you might just find yourself saying: Whose child are you really?

Why doesn't Luke tell us anything about those first 7 days? It's pure speculation, but I wonder if Luke didn't know better than to put Mary's post-partum depression on display for all to see. Or maybe, and I think this is it, maybe Luke was at a loss for words. Maybe all Luke had to go on in that first week was that Jesus, the one of whom angels sang, does nothing but pee and cry, and if he wrote that, no one would believe what Luke says elsewhere about him, that he came to save sinners and make all creation new. In other words, Luke is now in Christmas, post-assembly time. Jesus has come into the world according to God's plan, but the baby in Mary's arms doesn't match the picture on the box.

And Mary now has her doubts. After 7 nights of sleeplessness it's all she can do not to say, "I can't take it anymore! Someone please tell me there's more to this baby than what I see before me."

So, she gives the baby to Joseph to take to the temple. Joseph takes off the blanket and places the baby naked on a stone altar. A priest raises a knife to cut a piece of skin as above the sound of an infant wailing you hear him proclaim: "He shall be called Jesus. He is a child of God." Ah, yes, sighs Mary, a child of God. I know whose child this is really.

It's curious to me that Mary and Joseph need to be reminded of this. As if the angel choir in her delivery room singing "Glory to God in the highest" wasn't sign enough. So why the circumcision?

Not too long ago I was chatting with my father-in-law about the importance of baptism, particularly in the Roman Catholic tradition, and how his mother, after giving birth to him, would not leave the house with her newborn baby boy until he was baptized. She would not risk getting into a car accident or seeing him get sick until she knew he'd been washed in the waters of baptism and sealed by the mysterious graces of the Holy Spirit. For her, baptism was her son's ticket to heaven should he die. Here at Four Corners Community Chapel, and in the United Church of Christ, we don't believe baptism saves a child from death in this life or in the next, any more than Mary and Joseph believed circumcision could do it for Jesus. We, I, do believe, however, that baptism is a necessary reminder of who we are, if not for the child than for everyone who knows the child.

I suppose this is why we hear stories about chaplains out on the battlefields of war, walking among the dead and they lean down to make the sign of the cross across the forehead not only of a comrade but also of an enemy, of a soldier who just minutes earlier was shooting at them. They make the sign of the cross and say a word of blessing. And if you ask them why they do it, they'll tell you, not because it changes anything for that soldier. What's done is done. But because it changes them. It reminds them that when all is said and done, we were all born and we all die as children of God.

In his letter to the church at Galatia, written some 50 or 60 years after the birth of Jesus, the Apostle Paul puts it this way, the only things that counts is faith working through love. So, Mary and Joseph bring their baby boy to the circumcision table not because it's

the right thing to do, but because it's the only thing to do. To lay Jesus before God and say, here you go, this is your child, now help us raise him like he's your child.

This done, they wrap Jesus back up and start for home. Maybe now the swing will work. But no sooner have they reached the exit and an old man named Simeon steps up with a message for them. At first it sounds great. "My eyes have seen God's salvation," he says. "I can go in peace." But then it doesn't. "This child is destined for the falling and rising of many. He is a sign that will be opposed. And a sword will pierce your own soul."

"Excellent," says Mary, "so glad we ran into you."

What do we do when Christmas is over, when all the carols have been sung, the gifts opened, the turkey eaten, when we've assembled all the parts just as the directions told us to, but the swing still doesn't do what we want it to? I've been thinking all week about what lullaby Mary might have sung to Jesus, late at night as she held him in her arms, this baby so sweet, who would grow to bring down the powerful and to raise up the weak.

If I had a hammer
I'd hammer in the morning
I'd hammer in the evening
All over this land
I'd hammer out danger
I'd hammer out a warning
I'd hammer out love between
My brothers and my sisters
All over this land

If I had a bell
I'd ring it in the morning
I'd ring it in the evening
All over this land
I'd ring out danger
I'd ring out a warning
I'd ring out love between
My brothers and my sisters
All over this land

Well, you've got a hammer
And you've got a bell
And you've got a song to sing
All over this land
It's the hammer of justice

It's the bell of freedom
It's a song about love between
Brothers and my sisters
All over this land¹

¹ Lyrics by Lee Hays and Pete Seeger