

Labor Pains

Rob Gieselmann, Christmas 2014

When the time came for my son, Tate, to be born, my wife, Laura, gave me very clear instructions. *You have one job. One job only. When we get to the hospital, you tell them, "She wants her drugs, and she wants them now."* Childbirth is painful – or so I'm told – So - *what did I do?* When we arrived at the hospital, the doctor told us that she didn't know how long Laura's labor might last – *It could take hours*, she said. I therefore took it upon myself to tell the anesthesiologist, "Let's wait a little bit. We don't want the epidural to wear off before the baby is ready to be born ..."

Laura looked at me like I was crazy – With wild eyes, she demanded, *What do you mean, "Wait?" Can't you even remember your one job! I want my drugs now*, she moaned in deep pain.

Birth is ugly; it is bloody and violent. Why, then, do we depict the Christmas manger scene as though a war hasn't just taken place – A struggle for life itself - Mary shouldn't be kneeling before the baby, but stretched out in the hay, sleeping-off her exhaustion. It was an immaculate conception, not an immaculate birth.

**Immanuel Kant claimed that looking into the starry sky will annihilate you – Standing outside on a dark night, the expanse of infinity smacks you right in the face. For you and I are tiny, infinitesimally small, in both *time* and *space*. Your temporal reach lasts but a moment – and your spatial reach extends no further than your fingertips.

The great expanse, Kant continued, rudely reminds you that some day, you will have to repay your debt to the earth. You borrowed its dirt, and the earth will demand repayment. *You are dust, and to dust you shall return*. The priest intones as she marks your forehead on Ash Wednesday.

One psalmist asked God, "*How long will I live?*" To which God answered, ...You will live one, maybe two, inches. Conflating the spatial into the temporal, linear distance becomes a metaphor for time – Put that way ... If the typical lifespan is 80 years, and 80 years equals 1-2 inches, and if the earth is 4.5 billion years old like the scientists say – then the lifespan of earth is 142,000 miles. Your life equals 2 inches; the earth's – 142,000 miles...Which certainly places it all in perspective.

Annihilated, says Kant;...And the writer of Ecclesiastes calls it vanity. *All is vanity under the sun*. Indeed, if you have never looked into the deep black heavens and observed Kant's darkness, you haven't really *lived*, now, have you?

One must ask,...Where is hope, and where is meaning?...In the darkness. But wait! Says Isaiah,...*The people who lived in darkness, on those people a light will shine*. For it is out of darkness that light is born. Or, as my cousin's wife wrote recently – the same cousin whose children are so sick – Christmas means nothing if it doesn't start with **darkness**. When the world couldn't see its hand in front of its face, Jesus was born. The people who have walked in darkness have seen a great light.

Dorothy Day was a Catholic social activist, prominent during the thirties and forties. She viewed church as a means to elevate the poor both economically and socially. Dorothy also understood the importance of beauty to the human soul – that there is meaning and eternity to be found in beauty. She would regularly quote Dostoevsky: *The world will be saved by beauty.*

One day, someone gave Dorothy a diamond ring, to do with as she saw fit. Some of her advisors told her to sell the ring and feed the poor. But Dorothy didn't sell the ring. Instead, she gave it to a poor old woman who lived alone. Her colleagues chided Dorothy, to which she responded simply, *The woman can sell the ring if she wants to. She can use it to buy food. Or, she can wear it. And enjoy it.* For, Dorothy asked, ...*Do you suppose God created diamonds for the rich only? Do you suppose God sent Christ, the light of the world for the rich only? For those who are comfortable, and well-fed? ...Literally or metaphorically?*

Jesus once said, *is it not those who are sick who need the doctor?* And likewise it is not those who live in light who need more light - but those living in darkness.

Do you live in deep darkness? ...Emotional or financial? Are you without a job, or struggling in relationship? ...or illness or conflict? And what about the earth, and its shroud of darkness?...With Ebola, and climate change, with maniacal Vladimir Putin and the so-called Islamic State? The earth, too, is in labor, pining for light to be born, and the labor is ugly and often violent.

Long lay the world in sin and error pining, the old carol intones, 'til he appeared and the soul felt its worth. And I have to say, of all the lines in all the carols in all the world, I believe I like that line the best. The soul – 'tho beat-up and exhausted, weary-worn, discovers its true worth – in the promise of this child. For God has not left you – nor me – nor the entire earth –- alone.

For unto you is born this night in the City of David a Savior, Who is Christ the Lord. Please, come on bended knee.