

“A Solid Foundation”

Exodus 1:8-2:10; Matthew 16:13-20

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I know this isn't Christmas, but I love a good birth story:

A hospital nurse writes about a non-English speaking couple who came in ready to deliver. The man kept trying to leave the delivery room, but the nurse kept insisting he had to stay for moral support. When the baby emerged, the nurse made the man look at the moment of delivery. Unfortunately, the next day the nurse discovered that he wasn't the woman's husband. He was her brother.

As a priest and pastor's spouse, I have heard quite a few birth stories over the years. All of them are unique. On a personal level I have never lived through one quite as *precarious* as the birth of our first grandson, Lyle, a few weeks ago. The words “precarious” and “precious” seem to apply equally as he lies in his incubator in the neo-natal unit.

So far he is doing fairly well. He is gaining weight and growing, although he is still hooked up to threatening and invasive looking machines. The sight of him lying there with all those tubes is almost too much to bear. Almost every family member that has walked into the neo-natal unit to see him has shed a lot of tears. Life can be extremely fragile.

So can our faith communities. Our faith communities are precious to us, and yet they are also precarious. The word “precarious” means something is not securely held or in position, dangerously likely to fall or collapse, too dependent on chance or luck, with an uncertain future.

Is that too gloomy of a description or does that sound like many of our faith communities, at least compared to how things were in past decades? Am I exaggerating when I say that our respective faith communities are becoming more and more precarious?

One reason this is so is that Christianity as a whole is diminishing in terms of size and power in the United States. According to Robert Jones, the author of *The End of White Christian America*, both mainline and evangelical expressions of Euro-American Christianity is in a freefall decline.

Because of that fact alone this congregation—and many others like it—will likely continue to become more and more precarious in terms of its future viability. Racial division and strife, of course, plays a role in the demise of American Christianity, especially in terms of its public witness.

This congregation has done a better job than most in terms of bringing people together from different walks of life. But sadly this is not the norm. For a variety of reasons that include differing worship styles and old-fashioned racism, whites and blacks often have a difficult time worshipping together.

As my husband wrote this past week on social media, it would be nice if we could eschew racism for “gracism.” This means we should learn to look at one another through a different lens—a grace lens rather than a race lens.

Last Monday many of us gathered outside with special glasses that enabled us to look at the solar eclipse. We were warned not to look at the sun, even as the moon was blocking out most of the sun’s rays. If we did we were in danger of damaging our corneas. Likewise, we do damage to our souls when we look at one another through the naked eye of racism rather than the lens of grace.

Somehow we need to reinvent ourselves in light of all the factors that are creating the demise of our faith communities. We need a *rebirthing*, and yet a rebirthing on solid ground, on a firm foundation. To help us along this path, let us look at two very important biblical stories.

The first one is the beginning of the story of Moses found in the first chapter of the book of Exodus. I call this the original “Birther” story. Do you remember the Birther claim about President Obama? The “birthers” were those, including the current President Donald Trump, who claimed that Obama was not an American citizen. I offer no comment on that interesting chapter in American history.

Similarly, I suspect that more than a few Egyptians questioned the legitimacy of Moses’ citizenship. They certainly didn’t have access to his birth certificate! You know the background to the story of Moses’ birth. Although kept in slavery, the Hebrews in Egypt had become a very strong and numerous ethnic minority and therefore they were a threat to Pharaoh’s administration. They were doing the jobs “nobody else wanted to do.” Does that sound familiar?

Pharaoh was so threatened by the growing power of the Hebrews that he ordered the Hebrew midwives to murder all the newborn Hebrew baby boys so that the population would start to diminish. In defiance of Pharaoh the midwives allowed the births to continue, telling him that the Hebrew women were too “vigorous” and that they gave birth even before the midwives could arrive.

An interesting detail in this story is the reference to the “birth stool” in verse 16 of the first chapter of Exodus. This word is a little misleading. The Hebrew term for “birth stool” literally means “two stones.” The Hebrew women gave birth by standing on two stones—or bricks since the Hebrews were brick makers.

I read that the Hebrews may have been introduced to the use of these “birth bricks” from the Egyptians, who believed that the bricks were given magical birthing powers by their gods. The Hebrew midwives were probably told that if they saw Hebrew women on the magical birth bricks they should make them get off of the bricks. Without the aid of the magical birth bricks, Pharaoh believed this would cause their birth rates to go down. But again, the midwives refused to comply.

Imagine how history would be different if the midwives had obeyed Pharaoh. The birth of the Hebrew baby boys and the future of their nation were very *precarious* because the Egyptians were determined to weaken their population and keep them in slavery. But we know the rest of the story.

One of the boys born secretly to a Hebrew slave woman was put in a basket and hid in the reeds of the Nile River. The baby was discovered “accidentally” by Pharaoh’s daughter and raised in Pharaoh’s palace as an Egyptian Prince. Later, as an adult, Moses would help the Hebrew slaves escape and secure their future. A boy born on Egyptian birth bricks became the foundation for the rebirth of the Hebrew nation.

As you reflect on that, let us look briefly at the story of the birth of the Christian church in Matthew 16. We usually refer to the Day of Pentecost as the “birthday of the church,” but in truth the church was born on the solid foundation of what we call “the Petrine Confession.”

A disciple named Simon confesses Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the Living God and thus becomes Peter, the rock on which the church is built. Simon is renamed “Petros” or Peter, which is a play on the Greek word for rock, “petra.” He becomes the rock—or birth bricks—upon which the church is built, a claim that has special significance in Catholicism where Peter is considered to be the first Pope.

I am particularly interested in this story of the Petrine Confession because it addresses the central question of my faith life—and maybe yours as well: the identity of Jesus of Nazareth. It is here that Jesus asks his disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” After giving some possible answers, all of which reflect the importance of the prophets of Israel, Simon Peter gives the correct answer: Jesus is the long-awaited Messiah (or Christ), the Son of the Living God, the foundational statement of our faith.

Obviously, the rebirth of Abrahamic or monotheistic religion through Simon Peter’s confession was just as precarious as the rebirth of the Hebrew nation through Moses. In one moment Peter is blessed for his “confession” and the next moment he is chastised for not understanding what he just said because, according to Jesus, he had set his mind on human things rather than divine things. Things did not begin well.

The moral of all three stories I have shared this morning—the birth of my grandson, the rebirth of the Hebrew people through Moses, and the birth of the church through Simon Peter—is that life and faith are precarious. The birth of babies, nations, and religions, by their very nature are precarious. The future is always uncertain, especially when it comes to the rebirth our faith communities. We are as fragile as a prematurely delivered baby in a neo-natal unit.

But we all love a good *rebirth* story, do we not? You and I have a chance to do just that, to pour the cement and build a church on a foundation that is even more solid than Egyptian birth bricks and the fickle faith of Simon Peter. We can begin with a very simple statement, a rock solid confession, that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God. Now we can build.