

The Grace of Jesus' Birth (Retreat part 15)

Many mothers, on their children's birthdays each year, tell them the details of the day they were born. Year after year, the details are repeated. At this point in our retreat, we will let Jesus show us the details of his birth. We will go beyond the words of the accounts in Matthew and Luke. We will enter more deeply than our imaginative recollection of nativity scenes. This week, we will receive the grace to experience the birth of Jesus and to understand its meaning for us.

Our desire continues. It is important for us to renew it this week. We desire to know who Jesus is much more deeply. In our observing and understanding him, we desire to fall in love with him more completely. With our love for him growing, we grow in our desire to be with him in his mission.

We will let the background of our entire week be filled with the images of his birth. They tell us who he is. As we've experienced before, this is not an intellectual exercise. It's experiential. We need to move among the scenes to know the anxiety of his parents, the poverty of their situation, the simple but extraordinary joy of Jesus' very human birth, the wonder of his being visited by shepherds, and the danger that already surrounded his life.

This week, can I let every anxiety I am feeling become connected with the anxiety of Mary and Joseph? Can I get in touch through experiences I have this week with Mary's labor and giving birth, struggling to surrender myself to give life to others? Can I come to know *the beds of hay* I am being asked to lie in? And then feel them transformed as I stare at Jesus lying there in that bed of hay? Are there poor or simple or handicapped or struggling people in my life who can remind me why the shepherds were so joyful at his coming?

Pray in these or similar words...

Dear Jesus,

I think it's the smell of the hay that gets to me the most. I see myself standing in the cold outside the stable, watching through a big opening in the wall. There is little light, but somehow I can see everything.

This prayer has been a wonderful journey. This journey has been a wonderful prayer. I watched as Joseph and Mary traveled to Bethlehem. Mary had helped with many childbirths at home, but there were no women with her now and she was a little afraid. She was still getting to know Joseph but she loved and trusted him. All of the sharing they had done over the past months as they talked about the pregnancy, his confusion, her unwavering faith, his unwavering faith, and his decision to stay with her — all of that had formed a strong bond between them, something much deeper than newlywed love.

Now as I pray with the scene, they are in the manger and all I can smell is the hay, wet and musty from the animals. How could you have a baby *here*, in the wet hay where animal droppings are all over?

What I really want is to go into the barn and help them. Can I let myself pray with my imagination and be unselfconscious enough just to go into the barn? I walk in, and they both seem glad to see me. She is so welcoming and so grateful to have me there. Joseph has been busy clearing a place for her to lie down, and when a big contraction comes, I just hold her hand tightly. But the smell! Jesus, how could you have been born into such a smell! I tried to get out some fresh hay to scatter on the floor for Mary, but then suddenly she was giving birth and no one but me seemed to care about fresh hay.

And then you were born, into the smelly and wet hay, into the strong hands of Joseph. He wiped your face and cleaned out your nose and eyes and when you suddenly began to wail loudly, they both laughed. I laughed quietly too, but I didn't want to be in the way at such an intimate moment, so I tried to stay back. Oh, Jesus, my heart is so full! The birth of any child into this kind of place would be overwhelming. But you? It's cold, it smells, and where is a bed? Where is a blanket for you? Joseph has wrapped you tightly in his cloak, but you need more.

Then I realize how very tired Mary and Joseph are after their journey and the joy of this night of your birth. As Mary dozes holding you, she opens her eyes again. Would I hold you while she and Joseph sleep? I can't believe it! I settle quietly into the hay where I won't disturb them, and I hold you in the cloak. I look down at you, smell your baby neck, and nuzzle your cheek. I feel such a love for you and what you have done. You are coming into the world like this — in this incredible poverty in a smelly stable. You are doing this to be with us in the poor and smelly parts of our own lives.

Dear Jesus, help me to feel this tininess of you during the week ahead. Help me to sense your helplessness and to recognize my own helplessness and to surrender to it as you have. Help me to be small in this world and to be here for you, as odd as that sounds, as you are so much here to help me.