



Christmas art by Elisabeth Reuter

C is for Christmas

The birthing of Christ is for our birthing. So sings the song of Christmas, and so sings gifted Frederick Niedner. Fred has become one of the country's most renowned preachers, even though he makes his living as a biblical scholar and teacher at Valparaiso University. More than making a living, Fred lives a calling... and how well he lives it!

We were privileged to have Fred as one of our presenters at the last Crossings International Conference (more on that later). As always, he has a pastor's heart, a keen mind, and a winsome appeal. Enjoy the Christmas gift that Fred shares in this homily, "The First, and Last, Nativity Concert." Better yet, carol it, along with Fred!

mhoy

Luke 2:1-20

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. ²This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. ³All went to their own towns to be registered.

⁴Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. ⁵He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. ⁶While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. ⁷And she gave birth to her first-born son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

⁸In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: ¹¹to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹²This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." ¹³And suddenly there

was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, ¹⁴"Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!"

¹⁵When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." ¹⁶So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. ¹⁷When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; ¹⁸and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them.

¹⁹But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. ²⁰The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

R is for Response--from old to new

Luke needed more than mere words to communicate the mysteries his gospel-laden story bears. So, he did what countless others with the same difficulty have done. To open his story, he borrowed some music and brought in the choir.

From one of the many sources he mentions in his preface, Luke appropriated a six-scene operetta that dramatizes the signs and wonders surrounding Jesus' birth. In its opening scenes, the angel Gabriel comes first to Jerusalem and then to Nazareth with good news, only to encounter the earthlings' chronic skepticism. "A birth, you say?" asks a too old Zechariah and a too young Mary. "Fat chance," says each in a tone of ancient, practiced demur.

Gabriel must sing to both about the power of the Holy Spirit, and by the time we get to the third scene, we can see that the music and the Spirit have done

their work. Two surprisingly expectant mothers bring their unborn children together for a meeting. We still sing the musical number this scene features, the one Mary sang for herself and old Elizabeth, as we do the one in Scene Four, that pent-up canticle of blessing Zechariah could finally sing out when Elizabeth's delivery also re-birthed the old man's voice.

O-S-S is for Out with Shepherds and Strangers"— Jesus' place par excellence

Which brings us to the fifth scene, long on words and short on music, but nevertheless pregnant beyond telling with the meaning of the Christ child's birth in a quiet spot amidst the world's great hullabaloo. Everything about this scene points to later elements of Jesus' life and work. By the time we get to the end of Luke's gospel, we can see why Mary couldn't have birthed her child at home. In this gospel, Jesus always finds himself on the road and pretty much without a "place" in this world. Then again, in Hebrew his name means literally, "YHWH makes a place," and all through Luke's story that place-making will happen, as it does, for example, in the house of Zacchaeus, the tax collector of Jericho.

Somehow, as we watch from back here in the hill country of Bethlehem, we know already that eventually Jesus will end up in such marginal and question-

able company all through his story. Check out his first visitors—not the rich, the pious, or the powerful, but anonymous shepherds, the earth's little people, much more adept at keeping sheep together than keeping the commandments in a way that the lawyers would approve. For such as these, faithful watchers of silent

sheep and distant stars, a choir of angels lit up the night with the glory of God and sang heaven's song.

The shepherds needed no second invitation. They went and found the wayfaring family, Mary, Joseph, and the wrapped-up baby who occupies the first of many borrowed spots on this earth, this time a bovine dining place, no less.



Caroler Fred speaking at the conference.

Most of us know Luke's story well enough to see from here all the way to the end, the point at which another Mary and Joseph will wrap this same young man in another kind of swaddling clothes and lay him in a temporary place he'll forever make his own. There hadn't been much singing in the days leading up to that scene. Instead, Jesus had heard a flood of bitter words and terrible, blood-thirsty shouting.

I is for Israel's-evensong, sung for our birthing



"Singing the Song" at the Second International Crossings Conference, October 19-22, 2008.

Amidst the din, Mary's child, all grown up now but stripped of his clothes and fixed to a manger meant for feeding vultures, prayed a verse she'd taught him one night after she'd got him home to Nazareth and laid him in a regular cradle. "Into your hands I commit my spirit, O God, thou faithful God," his tired voice sang out. These lines were that day's "Now I lay me down to sleep," or "*Müde bin ich, geh zur Ruh.*" We know them as a piece of Psalm 31, already then one of Israel's evensongs.

I think of Jesus singing these words, not speaking them, perhaps because I can't imagine a death scene, including my own,

at which I would speak, not sing, words like, “Hold thou thy cross before my closing eyes.”

It was for this moment, and not only the one on that first night out on the hills near Bethlehem, that the heavenly choir sang about glory and filled the night with unearthly light, for the child born to Mary becomes flesh and blood like all the rest of us children of the womb in order to find and make his place in each place and amidst every dislocation we know in our own, brief life spans. His simple, borrowed birthing room foreshadowed the place of his burial. He goes through life making all such places, and all our places, his own. In the end, our burial place becomes his birthing scene.

N is for *New voice, New singers*

I’ve seen it happen, although without the aid of Luke’s operetta I might have missed the clues. The angels I heard were babes themselves, four and five years old, a grandchild and great-grandchild who’d climbed up on their nearly comatose Papa’s bed in the grandparents’ dining room turned hospice center. To that old, silent man wrapped in swaddling clothes, those babies sang. Our ancient shepherd friends would have loved the wee ones’ rendition of “I am Jesus’ little lamb,” and maybe even “Jesus loves me,” although the Barney songs that got mixed in with the others may have confused them.

About the time the adults in the next room decided this concert should end, we heard a third angel joining in. Though tired and raspy, the new voice was strong, and this third member of the heavenly host even started a song on his own. “Away in a manger, no crib for a bed, the little Lord Jesus lay down his sweet head. . .” The first two singers knew that song, so they joined in, and together they all sang,

*Be near me Lord Jesus, I ask you to stay,
Close by me forever and love me I pray,
Bless all the dear children in thy tender care,
And take us to heaven to live with thee there.*

In that moment, in the presence of those angels, we could no longer distinguish a hospice center from a birthing room.



Keynote speakers Steve Kuhl (left) and John Strelan (center) involved in a round table discussion.

All of us live and each of us will die in some such borrowed place. And thanks to the child whose birth the angels announced in song so long ago, every one of those places, and all that happens to us in them, plays out as yet another scene within Luke’s drama.

We’ll never be without a song in any of those scenes. Nor shall we lack for swaddling clothes, the sort used for burial, the baptismal outfit that belongs to each one of us no matter how naked or covered in shame we might find ourselves. And oh, how we’ll rejoice to wear it on the morning that finds us singing whatever chorus comes when the angels appear one more time to announce to shepherds and children everywhere, “You’re looking here for her? She’s not here among the dead, but risen!”

“Gloria in Excelsis” perhaps? Perfect.

Frederick Niedner



Keynote speaker Mary Sue Dreier chatting with Robert Schultz (right) and Susan Bertram Rathke (left).

G-S is for Good Song-

The Second Crossings International Conference

If you liked what Fred just sang, imagine the song of him together with a whole chorus of other gifted presenters at the Second Crossings International Conference! Some of them have taken the time to put their compositions on-line—visit them on the Crossings website.

The three keynoters and nine presenters all came with excellent backgrounds and credentials in their diverse fields. The Conference held October 19-22 featured two days of presentations and was preceded by a full day of Conference workshops, one on Robert W. Bertram's **A Time for Confessing**, and the other on the "Six Steps through a Text" Crossings method. The location of the Conference was on the beautiful campus of Our Lady of the Snows in Belleville, Illinois, just in the process of being decorated for its famous annual Christmas tour. Our Roman Catholic hosts were wonderful.

If I had to find a word to describe our song, it would be joy. Some of the joy was the makeup of our group, friends and colleagues from international countries like Asia and Australia but also states from all around the country including Alaska! Most of them I have been with many times before, and it was a joy to be with them again. There was the joy of being in life together with homilies and sermons and worship, in mealtimes and conversations that went well into the night and started early in the day.

(Below) Jerry Burce (right) explaining to Phyllis Wallace the six-step method during the pre-conference.



(Above) Michael Hoy, Thelda Bertram, and Ed Schroeder signing Robert Bertram's book. (Left) Bp. Armencius Munthe (Batak Lutheran Church). Offerings from the Conference Eucharist service were donated to his project of distributing newly-translated Bibles in Indonesia.



There was also the joy of remembering a dear Crossings friend and saint, +Robert W. Bertram of blessed memory. His book published posthumously was given as a gift to all the participants; and his dear widow, Thelda, together with life-long friend and foreword-writer Ed Schroeder and book editor Michael Hoy, were on hand to sign copies (see above). I can only imagine Bob's singing along with us, though with his humble "oh my" at the sheer honor of it all.

Most of all there was the joy of the song itself that we all sang in harmony. All of us came with a faith-filled commitment to the Song of Jesus the Christ crucified which, with all of its integrity and fullness, rings out over the din of not only the principalities and powers of our time, but over the law itself. This is how "honest to God" the presenters were willing and able to sing.

I'm hoping the song continues. I have reason so to hope. It is being sung this Christmas, and well into the new year and years. It is the promise of the birthing song that began in our baptisms, and will be with us in all Christ's peace and joy with which he so dearly gifts us!

Michael Hoy

Printing and mailing this quarterly is paid for by your gifts, thank you. If you are a reader but not yet a giver, we can wait. When you are ready to be both, we won't object.