

December 2024

From the Bishop:



Dear Beloveds,

This is but the beginning of the birth pangs ... Mark 13:8

There are a lot of stories about women and pregnancy and motherhood in the Bible. To list some of these women off the top of my head, and in no particular order: Hannah, Sarah, Elizabeth, Mary, Eve, Hagar, Rebekah, Jochebed, Rachel, Tamar, Bathsheba, Ruth, and all those unnamed women - Manoah's wife, the Shunammite woman, the widow of Zarephath, and more, I'm sure.

I think that there is a tendency to over-spiritualize these women's stories – or, honestly, to just pass over them because we know the outcome of their pregnancies (and so often we memorize their sons' stories instead of theirs). We know Hannah had Samuel the prophet ... but we might forget she fiercely prayed and wrestled with God for a child. We know that Jochebed had Moses ... but we might forget how she gave him away (actually placed him in a basket and sailed him down a river) to save him and then pretended to be someone else in order to raise him. We know that Bathsheba had Solomon ... but we might forget the messiness and horror that came before his birth – how she became pregnant with her first son and how he died early in life and later how she maneuvered to get Solomon on the throne.

And then there are the two pregnancies in Advent:

- Elizabeth. Old menopausal wrinkled-up Elizabeth who is surprisingly with child. Elizabeth who gets both startled and assured when her baby kicks for the first time as she greets expectant Mary on her doorstep.
- Mary. Young Mary who is so often depicted in art and literature and even theology as being passive and demure. As being above such things as having spinach between her teeth or toilet paper stuck to her shoe or anything that goes along with being human. We don't hear of her having cravings or swollen ankles or heartburn or a growing belly. But, surely, she did. How could she not as she carried our Savior within her?

Advent is sometimes depicted as a waiting time. As a time when we are anticipating something coming towards us. We often say that "Christmas is coming" or "Christ will come again."

But isn't Advent also a movement time. A time that changes and expands, stretches and swells. A time when there is kicking and motion. A time that is exciting but also terrifying. A time that is anticipatory but also unknown. A time when something is growing inside but cannot be seen ... yet.

As I write this, the 2024 election happened a week ago. For half of the country, the outcome was devastating. For the other half, it was welcomed. Personally, I am trying to understand what this means for so many. Truly, I am concerned and broken-hearted when I think of the campaign promises that were made and the potential actions to so many vulnerable communities. The possible scenarios can make you stop and weep and fall on your knees exhausted.

But here's the thing: Regardless of the outcome of the election, we are an Advent people. Like Hannah, we pray to God. Like Jochebed, we act to save those whose very lives are at risk. Like Bathsheba, we name and work for the well-being of those we love. Like Elizabeth, we clasp our bellies and feel the Spirit moving within us. Like Mary, we lift our heads high and we cry out against injustice and tyranny and we lift up those who are marginalized, hated, and oppressed.

In this Advent / Pregnant / Gestation time, as we wait and act, grow and stretch, move and expect, as we deeply yearn for this new life that is coming, may these women's stories fill us with fortitude and courage, and may Jesus – the Word made flesh, Emmanuel, God With Us – bring the promises of hope, peace, joy, and love to completion in this beautiful and broken world. May these birth pangs bring a new world into being.

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From the VEEP:

Blessed be the Abba God of our Savior Jesus Christ, who with great mercy gave us new birth: a birth into hope, which draws its life from the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead; a birth to an imperishable inheritance incapable of fading or defilement, which is kept in haven for you. (1 Peter 1:3-4 – The Inclusive Bible)

As we enter the season of Advent, we turn our thoughts to preparing for the coming of the Christ child. Stories will be told of the angels visiting Elizabeth and Mary and the miracle of a virgin conceiving and bearing a child. We will sing hymns and prepare the way for the glorious arrival.

Christmas is just around the corner! This year, however, I'd like to step back a bit and consider this miracle from a slightly different perspective. While participating in The LiVE Project's Faith in Public Life class this fall, I was challenged to look for images of God that are outside the traditional, often masculine ones. In doing so, it occurred to me that the most non-male imagery connected to God is related to pregnancy and childbirth. Therefore, I'd like to take a bit of time to consider the maternal aspects of God, starting with the pregnancy of Mary.

To me, the miracle of Jesus' birth isn't that a virgin bore a child, it is that God chose to be born at all. After all, God is a creator - God is THE creator - and could have entered our mortal world through any act of creation. Instead, God chose to be a *procreator* and the difference is significant. When one creates, it is from material outside of oneself - for example, Geppetto making Pinocchio out of wood or Michaelangelo creating *David* out of marble. *Procreation*, on the other hand, is creating out of oneself. As we say in the Nicene creed, "begotten, not made." Rather than remain separate from creation, God chooses to be born into it, "true God from true God." Some of God's own self enters into Mary and begins to grow. This act of procreation is a miracle indeed, and because God as Spirit exists outside our gendered understanding of the world, we have the freedom to imagine God as 'progenitor' or 'parent' rather than the masculine 'father.'

Where else do we see pregnancy and birth symbolism in the life and teachings of Jesus? Jesus uses a birth metaphor to describe how we enter into the kingdom of God- transforming from creatures to children. He tells Nicodemus that "no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." When asked how that can be so, since we cannot enter our mothers' wombs a second time, Jesus replies, "No one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit." (John 3: 3-5) Here we also have the Holy Spirit acting as procreator and birthing us into new life – another maternal aspect of God.

Nurture is another trait with maternal connotations. According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, nurture as a verb means to supply with nourishment. I suspect one reason we associate nurture with women is because they are our first source of food, both in the womb and immediately following birth. Throughout scripture, Jesus uses food metaphors to describe himself. He is the bread of life, the true food and drink, the bread that came down from heaven. He says that "Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, ... for my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me and I in them." (John 6: 41- 56) Although I understand the Eucharist is meant to remind us of Jesus' sacrificial death, I think it is also reasonable to see being nourished by Christ's body and blood through a less cannibalistic, more maternal lens - an approach that certainly draws on more feminine imagery. We have all, Jesus included, been nourished by the body and blood of our mothers while growing in the womb.

As we work to dismantle racism and sexism in our religious institutions, it is important go beyond the traditional white male image of God that has been prevalent in the church for so long. Expanding how we view the rites and rituals of the church is one step we can take. This brings me back to Mary's pregnancy and God being procreator rather than creator. Jesus is begotten, not made, and therefore grows in Mary's womb, nourished by her body and blood. Once born, he grows and is nourished by the other gifts of creation, as all humans are. In death, he becomes the mother womb in which we abide, nourished by his body and blood as we prepare to be born of water and the Spirit as true children of God. No longer mere creations, but joint heirs with Christ, given new birth into a living hope.

Blessed Advent to you all!

Here is what the Synod Council or I have been up to in November: **November 1-8:** Synod Prayer Vigils; **November 4:** Met with Churchwide leadership about the Bishop Call Process; **November 7:** God's Love Made Real Region 1 Zoom with Bp. Eaton; **November 16:** Synod Council Meeting: Among other things we approved several items related to Synod Assembly and acted on recommendations from our Grants Task Force and Policy Review Team; **November 23:** Synod Vice Presidents' Zoom - this month we welcomed a guest speaker addressing ELCA Social Statements and Messages.

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