
Birth of the Holy

Luke 1:26-38

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on December 21, 2014 by the Rev. Meghan Feldmeyer Benson

Every woman I know who has been pregnant testifies to a strange phenomenon—the phenomenon of people in their lives, whether known to them or complete strangers, reaching out and touching their growing belly. Many of these women have found this to be an intrusive and awkward gesture. It is difficult to imagine other contexts when it would be appropriate to walk up to perfect strangers and touch their bellies, so why now is that suddenly socially acceptable with pregnancy? I haven't been pregnant to speak to how odd it may feel to have people you don't know (and people you do), determine that your body is publically available for stomach pats. But I have been on the other side, unexpectedly having to *actively resist* the urge to reach out and touch the swelling mid-section of many a friend, colleague, or even stranger. And I can't help but wonder why?

Perhaps it is the mystery and promise that pregnancy reveals. I want to reach out and draw near to the signs of new life and new growth in our midst. Similar to those first shoots of grass or daffodils in the spring that make you want to kneel close to the earth, just to see it—it's simply exciting to touch a growing belly and to know there is a *baby* underneath!

So much of what happens in the womb is still a profound mystery. None of us remember being knit together in our mothers' wombs or anything about those nine-months of gestation, nor can we watch what goes on as cells divide and grow and become recognizably human. Yet here we all are, every one of us fearfully and wonderfully made in God's image, and we had our beginning in the dark confines of the womb.

Back in the old days, there was no way to know ahead of time if you were having a boy or a girl, or if there was more than one baby! There were no high tech ultrasounds to capture a somewhat mushy image of the child you were carrying. It was all a surprise, only to be revealed at birth. And even with our technological advances, the details and formation of life in pregnancy are still very much a mystery. So this passage in Luke is in many ways thoroughly modern, because Mary is given a lot of information at the outset. In what can surely be called a life-altering moment, Mary learns that she is soon to be pregnant; she will have a son; she should name him Jesus; and that this kid will pretty much rock the world, making his debut as the Son of God. Mary has only one question at the end of the angel's spiel, and that is about the mechanics of it all, since she is a virgin; which is a fair enough question, but unlikely to be where my questioning would have ended! Instead, we see Mary respond in the same way the prophet Isaiah before her had, with "Here am I, let it be with me according to your word." This is a statement of profound trust—profound trust in the face of what looks to be daunting instruction—even more daunting than Mary knows.

We don't know if Mary's response was said in joy and laughter, or in perplexity or fear, or even in knowing resignation. We have her words, but we don't know her tone. We don't know how soon after this encounter she spoke the words of the Magnificat, and if her heart had to catch up with her words. Part of why I love the image on the cover of the bulletin today is that Mary looks a bit unkempt and bewildered. Like, perhaps this wasn't the best news of her life. Maybe she even had to warm up to the idea. And fortunately for Mary, she had time to grow into the call God had for her—a full nine-months in fact.

You don't have to have been pregnant to know something about a season of gestation...that mysterious window of time between when life begins and when that life is born. It is basically a

season of patient waiting while new life forms. Gestation periods can vary. For a hamster or mouse, those little guys take just about 20 days. But for an African elephant? Momma elephants are pregnant for nearly two years!

Advent is the season of gestation in the liturgical calendar. It is the season devoted to waiting, preparing, praying, and yearning. The God of all creation is gestating in Mary's womb, while all the earth is awaiting the opportunity to meet God. And to the surprise of many, God doesn't show up in glory and splendor, but in the form of a helpless baby through the vulnerable body of a willing girl.

You'll notice that the altar frontal and vestments are purple. Purple is the color for both the season of Lent (the 40 days leading up to Jesus' death and resurrection) and the season of Advent (the 4 weeks leading up to Jesus' birth). Some churches like to use blue on their vestments to distinguish Advent from Lent, since Advent is typically understood as a more hopeful and joyful season, and Lent—well, Lent is kind of a downer. But I like that we've retained the historic connection between the seasons with the color purple. Because although it is very different to prepare for a birth than it is to prepare for death, preparing for birth isn't all joy. Preparing for a new baby involves certain questions of sacrifice, examination, and discipline. Women give up alcohol and sushi and cold cuts and goat cheese and a host of other things advised by their doctor, while families prepare for the new family member by shifting everything from their furniture to their priorities.

Have you ever felt like you're in a season of gestation? A womb is dark, it is cramped, and growing babies can't really see or hear. Nor do they have any idea what is coming next. It may be that you feel like the embryo in this analogy—in a place of waiting and patience, feeling a bit unformed and uninformed. Your knowledge of the future is unnervingly blank. Your only job is to *wait* while the hands of God continue to shape and form and make sure that you are ready for birth.

Or perhaps you know exactly where you want to be and you also know it may be years before you can get there. Before I went to college, I already knew I wanted to go to seminary—and I sort of thought that college was this thing I pretty much had to do in order to get to seminary. I didn't particularly see the value in it on its own, just as a means to an end. And yet, of course that season of my life was so crucially important to my spiritual formation and growth. God was knitting and weaving me together, and in hindsight, I wouldn't trade a minute. It wasn't the throwaway time I'd expected; it was a put-together time. So often, if we are in a season of gestation, we just want it to be over, to have clarity, to get out, and to move onto the next phase, but as any OB/GYN will testify: every day matters.

There is a movement in the labor and delivery world called "Go the Full 40," which refers to the 40-week term of pregnancy. In a world where people often decide to induce labor on our own timelines, the phrase is meant to remind families that every week matters in the formation of an infant. Every extra day in the womb, even late in pregnancy, reduces the risk of health problems for the infant. Those who have had a preemie baby will affirm how much they wish they could have carried their babies in the womb until full term. If you are in a season of gestation, it can be awful to wait. But waiting in that place is exactly where you're supposed to be. It's a place that cultivates a holy and necessary patience. As I was reflecting on the 40 weeks of gestation of a human infant, I couldn't help but think of some of the other 40s in the Bible that could arguably be considered times of gestation, in between times before new birth, when simply waiting was a significant part of the process—40 days for Noah in the ark; 40 years for the people of Israel in their desert wandering; 40 days for Jesus in the wilderness. These seasons of 40 are times of gestation, crucial times for holy waiting, attentiveness, and formation.

If you don't relate to the growing infant, you may relate to the expectant mother. It can be a joyful place, but it can be a precarious place too. Being the incubator for something new is both exhilarating and exhausting. Think of artists, writers, or composers who seemingly carry within their souls painting, or songs, or novels—all of which may take months and months to bring to life. Pregnancy is often hard on a body. Women can feel sick, exhausted, and afraid. And without the benefit of modern medicine, childbirth can be dangerous. I suspect that there are few other things in life that contain both the simultaneous joy of expectation and the fear of all that could go wrong; worrying about the baby, worrying about yourself.

Because whether you're the baby or the mother, there is really only one way out. You can't be pregnant forever, and you can't stay in the womb either. This is good news!

My sister is a labor and delivery nurse. After 15 years of nursing, she says that nearly every woman who is in labor for the first time, whether she's had an epidural or not, will say at some point when the laboring gets hard, "I can't do this anymore!" These words escaped my sister's lips too when she was in labor, even though she'd been a nurse nearly a decade when her first child was born, and *she knew*... (she knew!) she couldn't stop the process. There is no way out, only through. What a wonderfully human thing to say—I *can't do this anymore*. Can any of you relate to this feeling? The feeling like you just may not be able to keep laboring any longer? When the pangs of transition are simply too hard to bear? When we're in a season such as Advent, a season of gestation, we naturally want to get out pain-free. We want to drift seamlessly from gestation to birth, forgetting that transitions are hard. Transitions can hurt. Labor is called...well, labor. From what I hear, giving birth is not so fun. But we have to remember and hold before us the hope that all these birth pangs are leading to new LIFE.

And so here we are in Advent 2014. And we are just on the verge of Christmas Day when Mary's "yes" to God transitions us to God's "yes" to us. The Advent season of gestation is drawing to a close. Mary is nearly there: she has gone the full-40. The birth pangs are beginning. But today's passage from Luke takes us back to day one, when Mary was on the verge of this holy gestation.

And Mary says yes. Gabriel assures her that God is with her and that the power of the Most High God will overshadow her. Whatever fears, insecurities, grief, or public shame she may encounter along the way, she is given assurance that God is there, overshadowing her...covering, protecting, hovering, loving her. And the Most High God will overshadow you too. Whatever situation you may find yourself in this moment, God is with you. You are not alone.

Mary says yes even when she is perplexed. She responds in faith: Here am I, let it be with me according to your word. As you wish, Lord. Do what you will. If you are in a season of gestation, if you are confused in the dark, remember these words, "Here am I...Here am I...Here am I" And in your remembering, make yourself available to God. Make yourself available to whatever work God may be crafting out of you. Can you, like Mary, *trust* that God is using this time for growth and development, even if you can't see what is happening?

Mary is the only one who has given birth to God's son, but you too are invited to participate in the glorious work of God—to birth holy things. Reach out and rest your hand on Mary's swollen and pregnant belly. Ponder the mysterious promises of God, whose whole being is invested in generating love, crafting justice, knitting compassion, and weaving grace. God yearns for these sacred things to be born in you. Mary was willing to say yes. Are you?