

**“Giving Birth”**  
**Sermon preached by Anne Ledbetter**  
**Westminster Presbyterian Church**  
**May 10, 2009**  
**Scripture – Romans 8: 18-25**

On this Mother’s Day, I invite us all to consider something we have in common: (which is) each of us was born of a woman. Every one of us is here today because someone, our biological mother, gave birth. And keep in mind: giving birth is both hard and glorious work. Undoubtedly, neither my birth, nor your birth was an easy event. There was probably some groaning and moaning, some writhing and crying – or as some would say, a good bit of blood, sweat, and tears.

Do you know the story of your birth? Fifty-three years ago next month, my mother delivered me by c-section (on Father’s Day!) Though she got to by-pass the trials of labor, instead she endured the ordeal of major surgery. Thanks to general anesthesia Mother’s initial pain was minimal, but her overall aching and discomfort from childbirth, lingered and took months to heal.

In routine childbirth, not only will a woman experience excruciating abdominal contractions, but labor and delivery may entail nausea, severe back pain, and a number of life-threatening risks. In other words, it’s not a cakewalk, even with the advantages of modern medicine. The bottom line is this: a woman gave birth to each and every one of us, and it was not easy. There was sacrifice involved.

For any who cannot relate to this description of childbirth, Bill Cosby offers simple instructions to help you comprehend the painful process. He says: Just use your fingers to take a good hold of your bottom lip, give it a little tug, and then pull it over your head. Come on, go ahead, try it! Well, anyway, that’s what childbirth feels like. On the other hand, medical professionals have suggested that passing a kidney stone mimics the childbirth experience quite well.

In our text today the apostle Paul describes how the whole creation has been in labor, groaning to give birth. Paul goes further to say that it is not just creation that is in labor, but we ourselves – we are groaning, because God’s Spirit is at work in us.

You may have noted the generous use of mother imagery today – and I can only say, it *is* Mother’s Day, and they did ask a mother to preach! But truly, think about it: the Bible’s first words about God are – in the beginning the Spirit moved over the watery chaos calling forth order and life. Our first glimpse of the divine is God as Spirit sweeping over the face of the earth. Thirty years ago, when I was in seminary, one professor proposed that in referring to the Trinity, we should begin with Spirit – SPIRIT, Father and Son.

The early Desert Fathers, the Christian contemplatives of the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> centuries, were fond of addressing the Holy Spirit as Divine Mother. They drew this image primarily from the Gospel of John in which Jesus described the Spirit as the One who would comfort believers as a mother comforts. Moreover, John’s gospel also described believers as those reborn by the Spirit, and so for them the Spirit is the Mother of all believers.<sup>i</sup>

Hildegard of Bingen (12<sup>th</sup> c. German abbess, poet, philosopher, & physician) referred to the Holy Spirit as the lifegiving life, the root of all created being.<sup>ii</sup> Julian of Norwich (14<sup>th</sup> c. English mystic) discerned these attributes in the Trinity – the high might of the Father, the deep wisdom of the Mother, and the great love of Christ.<sup>iii</sup>

In the beginning God created the world, and gave birth to a glorious creation. In our human experience it is the female who gives birth, and thus one of our images of God is Mother – the one who births, nurtures, guides us. Remember, that when Moses asked God for a name,

God answered, “I AM WHO I AM.” The infamous no-name. You see, God cannot be limited to a name, or an image. The Bible overflows with images which help us envision and understand God. Scripture refers to the Holy One as Spirit, wind, breath, rock, fortress, refuge, light, love, Abba Father, mother eagle, suffering servant, king, sovereign, lover, creator, nursing mother, comforter, shepherd, potter – to name a few. All of these images help us understand God’s character and ways. In calling God *Abba*, or Daddy, Jesus communicated to his disciples that God is not only Almighty Ruler of all, but also the One who loves us more than a Parent loves a child. Jesus also described God as a woman who lost a coin and swept her kitchen clean until she found it. While these human images help paint a more personal and intimate God, we also must remember that God is neither male nor female, but Spirit – the Spirit of Love which labors within us to be born anew.

God has given birth to a creation which continues to groan for redemption, renewal and restoration – the fulfillment of God’s shalom. As part of God’s created order, we find ourselves not just laboring in God’s vineyard for justice and peace, but in labor, as God’s Spirit seeks to give birth to something new and life-giving in and through each of us.

What is God seeking to birth in you? What are your labor pains about? What groans in your body, your heart and soul for life? Perhaps your heart is wrestling with old hurt and resentment, and God is yearning to birth forgiveness in your life. Maybe you are struggling with an addiction – something which governs your thoughts, drains your resources and alienates you from others. God’s Spirit groans within you, to birth you into recovery. What might God be trying to birth in and through you? Maybe the Spirit is striving to heal your grief and spawn new life. Perhaps God has fertilized in you the vision of an outreach to the homeless.

Did you know that Mother’s Day began with the groaning of creation and the labor of a woman? It was Juliet Ward Howe, who penned the Battle Hymn of the Republic. Throughout the Civil War, Howe saw some of war’s worst effects – not only the death and disease which killed and maimed soldiers, but the widows and orphans the war produced on both sides, and her country’s economic devastation.

In 1870, Julia Ward Howe took on a new cause. Distressed by the realities of war, and seeing the Franco-Prussian War on the horizon, she called women to rise up and oppose war in all its forms. Howe urged women to come together across national lines, and commit to finding peaceful resolutions to conflicts. Listen to her declaration:

Arise then...women of this day!

Arise, all women who have hearts!

Whether your baptism be of water or of tears!

Say firmly: “Our sons shall not be taken from us to unlearn all that we have been able to teach them of charity, mercy and patience.

We the women of one country will be too tender (to) those of another country to allow our sons to be trained to injure theirs.”<sup>iv</sup>

Howe’s international gathering of women continued annually for many years, but her peacemaking emphasis had faded by 1914 when Woodrow Wilson made Mother’s Day a national holiday.

Hallmark seems to have hijacked Mother's Day, yet just over a hundred years after Juliet's proclamation, another woman issued a similar challenge at a national church gathering. In 1978 Ruthann Knechel Johansen, delivered her message "Giving Birth to a New World," to women at Manchester College in Indiana. Johansen urged, "Because of the indwelling of the Spirit, which makes us restless for reunion with God and which moves us toward community, we must join together to enable the birth of a more humane society here at home and to extend that same liberation globally." Instead of the usual altar call, Ruthann challenged the women to act for the world. And they did, giving birth to the **Global Women's Project** which addresses global poverty, oppression and injustice. For thirty years GWP has been empowering women by partnering with grassroots initiatives around the world.<sup>v</sup>

Giving birth is both hard and glorious work, but it is our calling as children of God. Why? Because God's Spirit dwells within us and seeks to be born anew in each of us. German mystic and philosopher Meister Eckhart gleaned this truth from the gospel: God desires each and every one of us to give birth to God – to bring into the world the fruits of God's Spirit. God our Creator has not stopped creating – it's an ongoing process, as God hastens on to fulfill, to complete, God's glorious realm of shalom. But our God does not work solo. God claims and adopts us all children of the Living God, as co-creators.

How does one give birth to God? Any Lamaze teacher would say: breathe, find a focal point, and get a coach. So let us breathe deeply each day filling ourselves with an awareness of God's Spirit. Let us choose Jesus as our focal point that we may stay centered through the struggle. And as far as a finding a coach, just look around! In the church, the community of Christ, we are not alone – we are in this together, continually coaching and encouraging each other.

Finally: *don't worry: the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory being revealed to us.*

One of God's great miracles is enabling new mothers to forget the agony they have just undergone. The 8, 12, or 30 hours of labor, fade into oblivion as they gaze upon the fruit of their womb. In John's gospel, Jesus refers to this amazing phenomenon in describing how the disciples will feel when he is gone. He says "You will weep and mourn, but the world will rejoice; you will have pain, but your pain will turn into joy. When a woman is in labor, she has pain, because her hour has come. But when her child is born, she no longer remembers the anguish because of the joy." (John 16:2-21)

Friends, we are all pregnant with the marvelous possibilities of God. As the Spirit strives to be born anew in us, there will be moaning and groaning, stretching and struggling. What will God birth in our lives? Hospitality? Faith? A new beginning? A practice of prayer? A renewed generosity? An empathic heart?

The new creation promises to be nothing short of a miracle, the glorious birth of God in our lives, in our church, in our community in our world.

*Let us pray:* Miraculous God, we thank you for the stirrings of new life in us this day. Amen.

<sup>i</sup> Jurgen Moltmann, *God – His & Hers* (New York: Crossroad, 1991.) p. 36.

<sup>ii</sup> Ibid. p. 38.

<sup>iii</sup> Gloria Durka, *Praying with Julain of Norwich* (Winona: Saint Mary's Press, 1989. p. 25.

<sup>iv</sup> Jone Johnson Lewis, About.com

<sup>v</sup> <http://globalwomensproject.wordpress.com>