

LABOR PAINS
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Labor pains. Not a typical topic in church.

Also, they're not something that we think of as something to look forward to.

However, if you've ever been pregnant for months,
and it seems like years since you could even see your toes,
labor pains mean that the wait is coming to an end. Yay.

The waiting **MUST** happen, however, to get a healthy baby.

Medical science has made remarkable strides in just the past 150 years
but it still takes 9 months for a baby to fully develop.

Diana Ross sang about how you can't hurry love,
and you can't hurry babies, either. They come when they are ready.

Getting to full term takes the same amount of time
no matter how much money you have or how much you miss your toes.

So, you might as well be patient about it.

How remarkable that both Jesus and Paul use the image of childbirth
to talk about patiently waiting for the Reign of God to come to fruition.

Each baby represents the culmination of eons of past human actions.

Knit together slowly in the dark, it takes flesh and is born of a woman.

When they emerge, they know nothing of that past;
they're all about the future, full of potential. What will this one do?

Now, babies may be about the future, but humanity is 99% about the past.

We are walking, talking bundles of what we've learned over the generations.

We call this "tradition," in Latin *trans-dare*,
literally that which is given over to someone else, and, specifically,
that which is given over from one generation to another.

Now, traditions have their place. By handing over knowledge through the years,
humanity has accomplished much: we're at the top of the food chain,
we can heal our sick, fly to the moon, and build magnificent buildings.

But too often, traditions can't change basic assumptions
about the way we think things should be,
especially between groups of people.

For eons various groups of people have been utterly convinced
that they are better than other groups of people
and tried to impose their claims to superiority on everyone else,
and are surprised time and time again that this causes problems.

For eons humans have turned to violence to solve our problems,
determined to impose our version of peace on everyone else by force,
and are surprised time and again when others find our peace oppressive.

There can be no peace if there's oppression; justice must be for all.

For eons humans have proclaimed there should justice for all,
and fought wars in the name of justice.

The rub is that justice won't come without change,
change that would make neighbors of those who are so different from us.

Today's Collect and Scripture readings are at the end of the sermon text.

Frankly, humanity is terrified of that kind of change.

But we will get justice for all only if we stop being afraid of each other,
 shift our orientation from being bound by the past alone,
 and strive toward the future of justice that God is already bringing.

Remember, "justice" means what God intended Creation to be like from the beginning,
 without human sin messing it up.

If God is already bringing it, why do WE need to strive for it?

For the same reason a pregnant woman doesn't start taking care of herself or her baby
 only after it's born. For the best outcomes for both mother and child,
 we start doing things differently right away, from taking vitamins,
 to watching what we eat, to monitoring our blood pressure and sugar.

If the future that God is bringing justice for all,
 then we are to care for and about that now, start doing things differently now,
 living as if we really believe that this Reign of God's is the best outcome
 for mother, for child, for sister, for brother, for all people everywhere, no exceptions.

This is a whole lot harder than it sounds!

Daniel, Hannah, Paul and Jesus all warn us
 that the sheer weight and momentum of our human past are formidable.

The alliances, privileges, habits, cultures, and sheer selfishness
 that humans either unthinkingly hand over to the next generation
 or even enshrine and adore as sacred tradition,
 are going to make nation rise against nation, kingdom against kingdom;
 the earth will quake as weapons are hurled
 and famine will spread when people can't grow their food in peace.

God doesn't do this to us, we do it to each other because we want things our way,
 the way handed to us by those like us who came before us.

But God's way is coming. God's Reign is coming. God is healing all Creation.

The labor pains are coming, and even before the Day of the Lord comes,
 we are to take care of that Reign now, we are to live into it now.

That is the goal and purpose of baptism in the Church, to commit ourselves
 to living into the Reign of God as best we can right here and right now.

Our baptismal covenant is our prenatal vitamin, if you will, strengthening us
 to do what we can to live eternal life, the life of the Eternal one,
 even before we live it in the fullness of eternity.

So, let's take a BRIEF look at that covenant for just a moment,¹
 the covenant that is the constitution of our new life in Christ.

First come the three renunciations,
 that which we are turning away from as rulers of our lives:

- Satan and all the spiritual forces of wickedness that rebel against God;
- The evil powers of this world which corrupt and destroy the creatures of God; and
- All sinful desires that draw us from the love of God.

In renouncing these things, we are turning away from
 an uncritical, unthinking acceptance of the way things are in the world.

Instead, we are to examine our traditions to discern which reign they are aligned with,
 and stop doing those things that further the reign of darkness, oppression, corruption,
 destruction, and selfishness.

Remember that our Presiding Bishop, Michael Curry, says that the opposite of love
 isn't hate or fear, it is selfishness, and selfishness is another word for sin.

¹ *Book of Common Prayer*, beginning at p. 302.

Which leads us to the next section.

We don't just renounce evil and substitute our own way of doing things; as Christians we have a very definite way forward: in the footsteps of Christ.

So, next come the three affirmations, where we promise to:

- Turn to Jesus Christ and accept him as our Savior.
- To put our whole trust in his grace and love.
- To follow and obey him as our Lord.

In promising these things, we turn toward the Christ, who gave us a concrete example of what a life lived in the Reign of God looks like even while we're still here on earth: it's a reign of healing, welcoming, feeding, listening, lifting up – all those things Hannah sang about.

Doing those is what it means to follow and obey Jesus.

Consider that the first creed of the church had just 3 words: Jesus is Lord.

That meant that Caesar was NOT the Lord of Christians.

Governments will do what they do, but we are the Church.

We are to follow and obey Jesus and what he says we are to be and do as we live a Reign of God life while we're still on earth.

Now, we've talked about tradition, and some traditions are beautiful.

The next part of the Baptismal Covenant is based on the Apostle's Creed, which is over 1,600 years old.

What a wonderful love song this Creed is about the nature of God!

- We worship a God who delights in the creation that God is still intentionally bringing into being.
- We adore a God who knows what it is to be human, who came among us as a sacred baby boy, born of a woman. Like us, he suffered, like us, he died. But, unlike us, Jesus, the Christ of God, is beyond death, and death has no power over God.

This promise of life beyond death is the gift Jesus is bringing to us when the labor pains are over and the fullness of his reign begins.

- Finally, in the Holy Spirit, we trust a God who is in, with, and among all humans, indeed, all creation; the Spirit binds together all those who love God, past, present and future; who is amazingly forgiving, and who restoring creation, and who invites creation to be part of the divine life forever.

The Baptismal Creed is about the nature of the God we worship, adore and trust.

If this is God's nature, then how shall we live?

The answer is a set of new traditions to live and hand on to the next generation:

- We will live by continuing in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, the breaking of bread, and in the prayers. This means, simply, to come to church! We are to gather regularly with others – specifically, those who are also committed to following Jesus – to share in the mystery of receiving the living Christ into our selves, and to love, forgive, and support each other in being the Church in the world.

- We will live by persevering in resisting evil, and, whenever we fall into sin, to repent and return to the Lord. This means we DON'T have to have a faithful life all figured out on the first day.
A good friend of mine, Tom Brackett, says that, on average, babies fall down 300 times before their first unassisted step, and fall another 350 times before they first run.
Just so, we'll fall plenty of times. We never give up on ourselves.
We stand up, turn back to Jesus, and try again.
 - We will live by proclaiming by word and example the Good News of God in Christ.
This means we will live as much like Jesus as we can while still being our unique selves – Christ shining out of a Bill suit, a Dorothy suit, a Jocelyn suit, and, today especially, a Colton suit and a Brettan suit.²
If we ALL did that, Christ would be EVERYWHERE, healing, welcoming, feeding, listening, lifting up.
Again, governments will do what governments do. We are the Church.
What does our Lord want us to do toward our neighbors? ‘
 - We will live by seeking and serving Christ in all persons, loving our neighbor as ourselves. This is all about trading selfishness for love, asking what Jesus would do right now, to live the Golden Rule every moment of every day.
 - We will live by striving for justice and peace among all people, and respecting the dignity of every human being.
This takes us full circle; we are to bring about God's idea of justice, not humanity's, seeking to fulfill God's intention and will for Creation as it was on the first day, doing our part to heal Creation here on earth.
- These renunciations, affirmations, covenants and promises all show how human beings are part of something so much bigger than ourselves: we are part of the divine life of God; we are part of all of Creation, and of a Church that covers the world.
We are invited to be a phenomenal force in proclaiming and living into the glorious future of God that is coming in fullness when Christ comes again in power and glory.
We are invited to care for God's promise and future now with as much love as a mother cares for a longed-for baby growing in the dark, as she patiently waits for the beginning of the labor pains and the birth that will change . . . everything.

² This sermon is on the occasion of the baptism of Colton and Brettan.

COLLECT OF THE DAY

Almighty God, your sovereign purpose brings salvation to birth. Give us faith to be steadfast amid the tumults of this world, trusting that your kingdom comes and your will is done through your Son, Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord.

DANIEL 12:1–3

“At that time Michael, the great prince who protects your people, will arise. There will be a time of distress such as has not happened from the beginning of nations until then. But at that time your people—everyone whose name is found written in the book—will be delivered. Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt. Those who are wise will shine like the brightness of the heavens, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars for ever and ever.

CANTICLE C, THE SONG OF HANNAH

My heart exults in you, O God; my triumph song is lifted in you.

My mouth derides my enemies, for I rejoice in your salvation.

There is none holy like you, nor any rock to be compared to you, our God.

Do not heap up prideful words or speak in arrogance; Only God is knowing and weighs all actions.

The bows of the mighty are broken, but the weak are clothed in strength.

Those once full now labor for bread, those who hungered now are well fed.

The childless woman has borne sevenfold, while the mother of many is forlorn.

God destroys and brings to life, casts down and raises up;

gives wealth or takes it away, humbles and dignifies.

God raises the poor from the dust; and lifts the needy from the ash heap

To make them sit with the rulers and inherit a place of honor.

For the pillars of the earth are God’s on which the whole earth is founded.

ROMANS 8:18–28

I believe that the present suffering is nothing compared to the coming glory that is going to be revealed to us. The whole creation waits breathless with anticipation for the revelation of God’s sons and daughters. Creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice—it was the choice of the one who subjected it—but in the hope that the creation itself will be set free from slavery to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of God’s children. We know that the whole creation is groaning together and suffering labor pains up until now. And it’s not only the creation. We ourselves who have the Spirit as the first crop of the harvest also groan inside as we wait to be adopted and for our bodies to be set free. We were saved in hope. If we see what we hope for, that isn’t hope. Who hopes for what they already see? But if we hope for what we don’t see, we wait for it with patience.

In the same way, the Spirit comes to help our weakness. We don’t know what we should pray, but the Spirit himself pleads our case with unexpressed groans. The one who searches hearts knows how the Spirit thinks, because he pleads for the saints, consistent with God’s will. We know that God works all things together for good for the ones who love God, for those who are called according to his purpose.

MARK 13:1–8

As Jesus was leaving the temple, one of his disciples said to him, “Look, Teacher! What massive stones! What magnificent buildings!”

“Do you see all these great buildings?” replied Jesus. “Not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down.”

As Jesus was sitting on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter, James, John and Andrew asked him privately, “Tell us, when will these things happen? And what will be the sign that they are all about to be fulfilled?”

Jesus said to them: “Watch out that no one deceives you. Many will come in my name, claiming, ‘I am he,’ and will deceive many. When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come. Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be earthquakes in various places, and famines. These are the beginning of birth pains.

SERMON HYMN: *How Small Our Span of Life*