

God the Midwife
Isaiah 66:7-13

May 8, 2022, Sermon by Rev. Alex Creager

*⁷ Before she was in labor
she gave birth;*

*before her pain came upon her
she delivered a son.*

*⁸ Who has heard of such a thing?
Who has seen such things?*

*Shall a land be born in one day?
Shall a nation be delivered in one moment?*

*Yet as soon as Zion was in labor
she delivered her children.*

*⁹ Shall I open the womb and not deliver?
says the Lord;*

*shall I, the one who delivers, shut the womb?
says your God.*

*¹⁰ Rejoice with Jerusalem, and be glad for her,
all you who love her;*

*rejoice with her in joy,
all you who mourn over her—*

*¹¹ that you may nurse and be satisfied
from her consoling breast,
that you may drink deeply with delight
from her glorious bosom.*

¹² For thus says the Lord:

*I will extend prosperity to her like a river
and the wealth of the nations like an overflowing stream,
and you shall nurse and be carried on her arm
and bounced on her knees.*

*¹³ As a mother comforts her child,
so I will comfort you;
you shall be comforted in Jerusalem.*

This is the Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

A little bit over three years ago, Hannah and I were at Mary Immaculate Hospital in Newport News. We were about to welcome the birth of our daughter Alanna. I was a mess that day. Far more than Hannah. She was incredibly strong and ready. But as Hannah will tell you, I can get

queasy easily. The nurses were far more concerned that day with me passing out than Hannah doing so.

That day, I also had no idea how much our lives were about to change forever. I was still reading the book, *What to Expect in the First Year*. “Last minute cramming, Hannah kept teasing me. I also wanted to be of help, but I didn’t know what I could do to make the day easier or safer or healthier for her or Alanna. Everything about the day was not my area of expertise.

Fortunately for us, there was another person in the room. Her name was Kristen. Kristen was our midwife. We chose Mary Immaculate Hospital for a number of reasons, but a big one was that the delivery would be led by a midwife, who remained in the room and walked with us every step of the way.

Unlike my anxious and nervous self, Kristen was a steadfast rock, guiding us, encouraging us, helping, and healing, offering safety, comfort, care, and of course new life. Nothing was ever too scary or too messy for Kristen. When things got more difficult, she became more active. But when she gave us space and trust, and far more belief in us as new parents than I honestly had in myself that day. It was a huge difference having Kristen there.

I am sure Kristen had seen many days of great joy and new life. I am sure that she had been in the room for lots of first cries and shouts of joy and hugs and high fives.

But I’m also sure that she was in the room for many complications and scary moments, and even days of unimaginable heartbreak, grief, and loss. And her job as midwife was to be fully present in all of it. To not flee from the room, to not stay safely on the other side, but to walk with parents and family through it all. With courage, strength, wisdom, and love.

I left that day so incredibly thankful to have a midwife with us and have ever since really treasured the gift of a midwife.

That’s why I love today’s passage from the final chapter of the prophet Isaiah. Because we find in this reading God being described in a new way for us. God is a midwife to God’s people:

*⁹ Shall I open the womb and not deliver?
says the Lord;
shall I, the one who delivers, shut the womb?
says your God.*

God is not on other side of the door, sitting in a calm waiting room to easy listening music, telling someone else to go in. God is here in the room with us, bringing forth life, walking with us in all the questions and struggles to come, getting hands messy, and being present in both joy and grief.

And it’s not just here either. In Psalm 22, which Jesus prayed on the cross, the Psalmist describes God this way:

*Yet it was you who took me from the womb;
you kept me safe on my mother's breast.*

And the same is in Psalm 71:

*From my birth I have leaned upon you,
my protector since my mother's womb.
My praise is continually of you.*

This is an image we don't often, if ever associate with God. God the midwife. But it's one we need. It's one that might open us more to who God truly is and who we are called to be. Abby King, a Christian writer, and essayist, reminds us:

*"There are seasons in our lives that mirror birth, too. There are painful, messy times that tear us open; times that are exhausting, where all we can do is groan and struggle as we push through; times where we reach the end of ourselves, feeling like we just can't go on anymore. **In those moments, we cry out to God for some pain relief. We want an emotional epidural to numb us up until it's all over.***

***"But God, in her wisdom, mostly comes to us as a midwife** She stays with us in our vulnerability and discomfort. She helps us understand that staying alive to the pain and working with it is a necessary part of the journey to wholeness. **She doesn't distance herself from the mess and emotion. She comforts and encourages and believes in us when we're long past believing in ourselves.** And when we reach the other side, God the midwife is still there with us, celebrating the new life that has been birthed."*

This past week I got to hear Wilda Gafney speak at Union Seminary. Wilda is a womanist Old Testament scholar, who has written a Womanist Midrash and a Womanist Lectionary for the Whole Church. Her work is diving deep into Hebrew scriptures, from a perspective we've often missed – the perspective of both women of color. Her first lecture of many excellent ones was on seeing and talking about God in new ways, with words and images that are there in the Hebrew scriptures, but we've missed for these 2,000 years. And she spoke about how the very beginning of the Bible – the first two verses of Genesis 1 –invite us to do that.

In those first two verses, we get two subjects: God, and the Spirit of God. The word for God Elohim is always in the masculine, he. But Ruach, the word for the Spirit of God is always in the feminine. And so, a clearer translation of Genesis 1 and 2 would show this bigness of who God is:

*"When beginning, **he, God, created the heavens and the earth,**
the earth was shapeless and formless, and bleakness covered the face of the deep,
while the Spirit of God, **she fluttered over the face of the waters.**"*

I had never heard these verses translated this way before. But as I reflected on them, I knew that scripture is always inviting us not to limit how we refer and talk about God.

For God in scripture is as forgiving father, throwing a celebration. God is strong mother. God is a hen desiring to bring her children back under wings. God is a soaring eagle. God is roaring lion. God is a shepherd looking for the last sheep, and God is a searching for her final coin. God is a rushing wind. God is a shining light. And God, here, is our midwife, bringing us into life.

How might this image and description of God, change how we think about God:

Maybe for many of us it brings us closer to God, knowing that God does choose to step into the messiness. God's not on the outside. She is here in the room with us. And God isn't going anywhere. Maybe it also invites us to hear God's words of wisdom, even in the difficult, painful moments, but also to hear God's words of trust and faith in us. God's love is shown closely, intimately, not just through words, but through action and incarnation and loving presence.

I wonder as well, how this image might change how we follow God with our lives:

Maybe not knowing God's presence, we won't stay on the sidelines so much. But we too will be willing to get our hands messy. Maybe as well, we know that not all our work has to be ours alone. But that our calling may be just as much to help others bring forth their life, their dreams, their visions, and that in doing so, we find our true calling. Maybe as well, it is to both celebrate in joy and new life, and also remain present with care and compassion in times of great fear and even loss.

I invite you this week to read over this passage again. And to maybe meet God anew. Not as some distant judge up in the clouds. But as a wise midwife, here in the room with us, showing us the true presence of love and life, and journeying with us in all that is to come. Amen.