

*Hannah**at the Foot of the Cross*

(MARK 15:40-41)

The baby's weight inside me was as heavy as the atmosphere around me. The other women had scoffed at my coming: someone seven months pregnant didn't belong at an execution! But Mary Magdalene understood why I needed to be there; I could look to her support as I had before.

I remember telling Mary I was pregnant. Not a word of condemnation came from her, not a single hint of disappointment or disapproval. I didn't want to remember how it happened, how quickly the father disappeared, or how I had betrayed my parents' trust. I will always be thankful that Mary didn't ask for any details, didn't waste a minute on the past. She just looked ahead, bubbly and excited, planning for the future as though this were her grandchild. Her enthusiasm spilled over, rousing me from dullness. We started choosing names, making blankets and clothing. Every tiny stitch I took brought a kind of balm, healing the rejection that throbbed inside, eroding the terrible aloneness.

While we planned and sewed, she told stories. "Something marvelous is afoot, my dear," she used to whisper

as though we were conspirators. "Aren't we the lucky ones to be living now? And what a treasure for your baby! To be born into this little circle of support, to know Jesus and his friends: a fine inheritance for a wee one!" I began to believe her: if they welcomed my child as warmly as they had me—without a trace of judgment—then my baby would have a family. I felt secure that they would never call the little one a bastard.

Then it was all ruined. Our high hopes dashed, our buoyant optimism smothered, that marvelous potential spoiled. It was as if someone had wiped the stars from the sky, or smashed the mountains into a flat streak against the horizon.

When they dragged Jesus onto the hill, I thought I would vomit. Welts swelled on his back, blood matted his hair, spittle trailed through the filth on his cheeks. Worse than the hatred that seethed around him was the sadness enveloping him. I couldn't watch, but I heard the hammer blows, the splintering noise as they hoisted the cross aloft, the curses of the soldiers, his moaning.

All we could do through this brutal business engineered by politicians and rabbis was look on passively. In my rage, wanting to lash out, I forgot I was pregnant and pleaded hysterically with Mary, "Can't we do something? Tell them to stop!" But it just dragged on, as though they had a job to do and would finish it, no matter how horrible the task. If they overlook the nasty fact that this is a human being, people can do anything, I guess.

Then Mary reminded me that Jesus had something to accomplish too. She murmured low, in a desperate effort to comfort me or reassure herself, what he'd said the night before. There in the draining heat, with dust clogging our nostrils, our emotions spent and the awful shadow looming above us, she retrieved the memory. "So this is what he meant!" she breathed. "A woman in childbirth suffers because her time has come."

Immediately she had my attention. Had Jesus thought of me? Somehow he knew that terrible mixture of emotions warring inside: dread and hope, fear and anticipation, bravery and embarrassment, outrage and blessing.

Whenever I think of the Hannah for whom I am named, I am so ashamed. Almost her whole married life waiting for a child, all her attention bent on that potential, her prayer straining with hope, her ardent pleading unrewarded, the grieving at the sight of other children, the insults she endured, then her life wrapped around the son, her sacrifice of Samuel as a gift to our whole people . . .

I didn't deserve to bear her name. In painful contrast, I resented the baby; I fought the idea of motherhood; I resisted the motion within; I wished with all my heart that the pregnancy had never happened. Only with Mary Magdalene, who seemed to know about inner torment, could I reach any peace.

Mary was still talking. "Don't you see, Hannah? He dreaded this day. But at the same time, it's his whole reason for being. He must see beyond Calvary. So you will look past the labor to the baby's safe deliverance."

She had more faith in me than I did. I was likely to sink into the pain and never get beyond the bloody ordeal. But her confidence inspired me to look at the scene I'd avoided, even see its connection to me. The baby, round and innocent within; the man stretched taut, and just as innocent, above. Any normal person would shield the eyes, draw a cloak close in self-protection, retreat to a distance in self-defense.

But Mary, as usual, insisted we stand fast. She started me thinking: could this death scene conceal mysterious birth pains? Did my condition, such an enormous liability, sensitize me to the link between a torture victim and a birthing mother? Were his convulsions as life-giving as my contractions would be?

I'd been tired and crabby for seven months. Throughout that stretch of time, I'd done almost nothing. Without Mary's

encouragement, I wouldn't have had the energy to make a few shirts and diapers. But maybe my life force was pouring in a different direction. I didn't seem to be doing much; but I was creating ears, eyes, fingers, a heart, chin, and mouth. My flesh given to nurture another's, my blood circulating into the child's system: hadn't Jesus said something about "my body and blood, given for you"?

The risk that lies ahead, the pain I will endure seem cast in a different light now. From the ashes of disaster, new seeds can sprout. Jesus gave me the right to be afraid, and the hope to get me through. I know that I can be sad, but also steady. If I can let go of anger and forgive as he did, I will clear the proper space for a baby to be born. How strange that I should learn from a dying man how to give birth.

HANNAH TODAY

The sentimentality surrounding pregnancy and childbirth can conceal less pleasant realities. Every child won't be a cherub; every mother doesn't glow with rosy health; and contrary to the greeting cards, every family isn't convinced that the little darling is a blessing. Even the most welcome, planned pregnancy and long-awaited birth is shrouded with ambivalence.

Yes, a mother may think, I want this baby, but will I survive labor and delivery? Will the child be healthy? How will my life change? How much of myself must I surrender to nurture this new life? How will the infant's demands affect my other relationships? If middle-class North American women, who often have competent medical care and high tech hospital facilities, worry about childbirth, what of the countless women who give birth in squalor, without medical aid, to undernourished babies that are the result of rape or incest, and place another unwanted burden on a family that is already strapped?

And yet, women continue to give birth. Mothers have always loved the potential of their children's lives enough to

risk their own. Perhaps they are captivated by the promise, the radiant possibility.

To the difficult births in less than ideal conditions, Jesus' pain brings a new dimension. Marie-Eloise Rosenblatt writes, "In the passion, Jesus shares the vulnerability women feel in society."¹ He is voiceless in judicial proceedings, as women often are, and powerless to prevent violence, as women often are. Much as women hate to feel like passive victims, we often are. Blind to accomplishments that are remarkable, women often believe they have done little, because the standards of achievement are male-defined. Where in the Gross National Product do we ever calculate the birth of a healthy human being? How in a resume do we include the launching of a secure child?

For those who are not biological mothers, or who have passed that stage, pregnancy takes on different connotations. That mysterious process of giving life may become the nurture of other relationships, a creative work, or the birthing of a new self. As with the physical condition, this state may be exhausting and debilitating, the results impossible to predict.

Yet, women's waiting participates in God's gestation; our creative processes en flesh the divine. Through pregnancy in its myriad forms, we learn first-hand about the interconnect-edness of all life. Furthermore, experiences of birthing give women a unique perspective on the cross. Like Hannah and Mary Magdalene, we have an intimate understanding of what transpired on Calvary. In the words of poet Jessica Powers, "Nothing but pain could go to meet this love."²

FOR DISCUSSION OR REFLECTION

1. "And there were many other women there who had come up to Jerusalem with him." (Mark 15:41)
 - How do you feel about the fact that the women stayed faithful to Jesus, even to the bitter end, while all the men except John fled?

- What does it mean to you that Jesus chose a feminine metaphor of giving birth to describe our salvation, our arduous birth into eternal life?
2. Christ's message came to Hannah through Mary Magdalene. Who has served as such a channel for you? What experiences has your mentor had that have enabled him or her to convey Jesus' word with understanding and clarity? What have you learned from this model about being Christ-like without being preachy, phony, or pious?
 3. Mark's community saw the cross as an instrument of political terrorism inflicted by the ruling Roman power on violent criminals, slaves, and people without rights. Only in more recent eras has the cross been embellished with jewels, cast in silver and gold, and worn as jewelry. As Jim Dunning points out in *Echoing God's Word*, that trivialization would seem to the first Christians like hanging a tiny electric chair on a gold chain around the neck.³

Does knowing the evolution of a primary Christian symbol affect your attitude toward it? A Venezuelan artist has sculpted a crucifix with a pregnant woman hanging from it. What do you think of this adaptation? If the crucifix has lost some of its significance for you, what image might work better? Create your own symbol of death/new life.
 4. The fourteenth-century mystic Julian of Norwich knew that contemplating suffering could be burdensome. She proposed instead that Jesus' passion was his work; he would work even harder if necessary, to accomplish his task. Perhaps a contemporary metaphor might be a woman who brings home her pay check to meet her family's needs. Knowing that her work has provided their education, medical care, piano lessons or clothing, she is

well compensated. If she had to work harder to finance a special need, she would probably do it.

Julian imagined Jesus saying, "Art thou well paid that I suffered for thee? . . . If thou art paid, I am paid. It is a joy, a bliss and an endless liking to me that ever I suffered passion for thee. And if I could suffer more, I would suffer more."⁴

Jesus looks from the cross at you. He is pleased with what you have done to continue his work and express his love, especially with:

John Kavanaugh writes in *America* (April 1, 1995) that Jesus, looking on you with love from the cross, says now and eternally: "Yes, you needed this. And yes, you were worth it." How do both thoughts apply to yourself?

5. Mothers are at their best when they are in touch with the source of all maternal love, God. When we are tempted to self-sufficiency, arrogance or despair, it may help to remember that God is continually giving birth to us, that in God's arms we are vulnerable children. Read Psalm 131 prayerfully.



THE FIRST RESURRECTION APPEARANCE

Defiant as child who refuses
to let the story close sadly,
she mined it again, hunting
the first page for a clue
that would foretell calamity.

Did this abrupt and brutal end
lurk in the promise of endless reign?
Her welcome had brought the baby and
all blessing. Limp as long
grasses, he lay in her arms.

If she squinted, the welts
and nail marks disappeared.
She could cradle the infant, soothe,
pretend the quilt was never rent
nor song stifled, nor son crucified.

Her dream was Easter-interrupted.
Again, that presence stirred,
familiar as cloak on peg,
scent of cedar or door ajar,
the signs of son come home.

She laughed at tragedy ending well,
loved him fiercely for trouncing death,
twisting the plot, flooding a cavernous
tomb with light, dancing age into youth,
frost into blossom, end into beginning.