

Sunday, November 29, 2015 – Advent 1
Pastor Erin Bouman, Irving Park Lutheran Church
Jeremiah 33:14-16, Luke 21:25-36

Waiting for New Birth

When I was pregnant with my oldest child, I did a good job of waiting for his due date. Although I am the kind of person who can get overly anxious about doing things early, I knew I couldn't expect this corresponding characteristic from my baby. I knew I shouldn't assume my first child would come early. I'd been told that few first babies do, and in fact, my due date came and went without any indication that the baby would be coming. And I was fine. Two days later, still with no signs of the baby's imminent arrival, I was still fine—I thought this baby could do without September 11 as a birthday. Just that evening, the contractions started coming. I did a good job of waiting then, too, before heading to the hospital. I'd also been told if I went too early, they might tell me to wait some more and come back later.

Instead I was inspected and told that yes, the baby was coming, and I was sent to a place called the labor room. I did a good job of waiting there, too, at least at first. But then the waiting got so much harder, so much more painful, the progress was so slow as to seem nonexistent. The nurse would come in and do a brief check-up and chirp that I was still at the same number. This baby just was not in a hurry to meet and greet life on the outside—which is ironic if you know my son, because he's a social being and very much on the go, despite what signs in his birth story would have predicted. At one point in the labor room, when it felt like time had stopped and I was going to be stuck there forever, when it felt like there was not a hallway, but a chasm, between the labor room and the room across the hall with the door marked "Delivery," at one point when I was so worn out that all I could do was shuffle around in circles and cry, I gave up. Physically and mentally and emotionally I had had enough. I told my husband, with teary resignation and complete conviction, "This baby is never coming." I truly believed it. To which he said, gently but reasonably, "Babies get born." Turns out he was right.

Advent is a time for waiting, four weeks of waiting for a birth: the birth of Jesus, God's son, God come to be with us. You could compare Advent with a pregnancy, but it's much shorter than that—the church calendar gives four weeks for Advent, not nine months. Also differing from pregnancy, Advent feels less like a gradual gestation than a season that arrives fully formed, right from the go—at least, that's how it seems to me, when I look at my December calendar and the commercials on TV and the songs on the radio and the decorations everywhere. We could bemoan the way our culture ramps up the pre-Christmas season, but we should note that the Advent scripture readings are correspondingly climactic. In what seems a counterintuitive move, the gospel reading for the first Sunday in Advent begins near the end of Jesus' life. The gospel for this Sunday is not about the coming of the baby Jesus, it's the grown up Jesus talking about when he's coming again. At that time, the gospel says, there will be heaven-shaking, earth-shaking, body-shaking events. We don't know when it will happen, we just have to wait. Wait, as we experience signs of its arrival. Wait, and it will be difficult. Today's Advent reading, and others we hear this week and in the Advent weeks ahead—psalms that plead for forgiveness, prophets that call for repentance—Advent readings are laborious. That's how Advent begins, not with conception, with a tiny plus sign on a stick, but with things breaking, water breaking, personal parts tearing. Stay alert, stay awake—as if you could sleep through contractions. The waiting of Advent is less like pregnancy, than labor.

Like labor, for many people, Advent is mostly cherished because it ends, how it ends: with a baby, with Christmas. The joy of labor is delivery—the relief that babies do get born, and that remarkable, that much anticipated and yet completely unexpected first sight of the child, face to face, that first glimpse of the mystery they have been for so long, that you now get to see. What color are

their eyes? What about their hair? Whose nose do they have? As a child grows, you look for other traits, other similarities between them and you: What are they like as a person? What is their temperament? Are they anxious about completing tasks, preferably ahead of time, like their mother? Or do they take a more measured approach, like Dad? Our personalities and proclivities are not just genetic, though. As adoptive families know and science shows, there's an interaction between our physiology and the environment in which we grow. As the science writer Matt Ridley says, it's not so much nature versus nurture, its nature via nurture. Who we are is activated by those who raise us, is shaped by those with whom we spend our time, is affected by those who give us love.

We talked about this in a recent Confirmation class: we drew family trees and asked the children to reflect on ways they were like their parents. It's always interesting to hear seventh and eighth graders talk about their families and their takes on them, including my own seventh grader and his take on his family. Since that lesson, I am still trying to convince my son that I am funnier than his father—but I suppose if I have to try that hard I have already failed. This family tree activity was an intro for a lesson about the holy family, a way to get us thinking about how Jesus must have exhibited and reflected traits of Mary, his birth mother, and also Joseph, his adoptive father, and also God, his heavenly father. It was an opportunity to think about how when we say that Jesus is born of Mary and the son of God, we are saying that Jesus is both human and divine. It was a way to explore an affirmation of creedal faith. When we say those ancient phrases: conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the virgin Mary, we are affirming something quite remarkable about how God works out our salvation. God chooses to do the work of salvation with human collaboration. This salvation is so longed for—the psalms and prophets have anticipated it, and yet it is also completely unexpected. The waiting, the labor of Advent, lead to the mystery of incarnation, and the joy of redemption.

And it is here that the metaphor of childbirth and parenting is most helpful, for it can tell us something yet more remarkable about the new birth that is at hand, and its mystery and joy. The delivery that happens, happens to us. In Christ, we become something new, something altogether new. So it is with children. When we talked with the Confirmation students about what ways they were like their parents, we also asked in what ways they were not. You know this is true of yourself: that there are ways in which you are not like either of your parents. And you can see this in children, you see the remarkable ways that they do not resemble anything like those who made or raised them. This is a yet greater mystery, and joy, this is the great challenge and holy obligation of parenting. As much as we may love seeing ourselves in our children, the best thing we can do for them is to help them grow up into who they are, aside and apart from us, see them discover and become that unique and wonderful person that God has created them to be. That is what God does for us, in Jesus. God says to us: let go of the limitations you've inherited, the sin you've been born into and that surrounds you, let that go and grow into a new being, a new creation. God gives us the love that makes this possible, as the waters of baptism break upon our heads, and God activates it in our environment, nurturing that love in the community that surrounds us. God is still collaborating with humanity, even as we wait.

For we have not yet seen who we are in the future God is working out for us. As the apostle Paul writes, in a letter to a church in waiting in Corinth, we now see it only dimly, we have not yet glimpsed that fullness of God's love face to face. And to another church, waiting in Rome, Paul writes, "I consider that the suffering of this present time not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us." Paul continues in that letter, with images of child birth: "We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now, and not only the creation, but we ourselves." We are groaning, for we know that this world and who we are are still in labor.

There are much longer, harder labor stories than I had with my first child. Some begin early, and the pain and anxiety continues well past four weeks, or nine months, or more, but even those are still too short for the delivery that God is working in and for us. That delivery was still in its infancy one dark night in a stable in a town called Bethlehem. We are still in labor, but the days are surely coming. Babies get born.