

Advent lessons from the pregnant women

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Although it's a crazy, busy time of year, I love Advent. I love it for all of its wondrous, yet not quite realized, images of anticipation, waiting, pregnancy, and birth. Christianity has never fully embraced these concepts, probably because so much about them is grounded in the experience of women. Instead, Christianity has often found itself relying on starkly contrasting views of women—on the one hand, the perfect almost not quite human female, epitomized by Mary mother of Jesus, and on the other hand, the prostitute, like Mary of Magdala (although there's no actual evidence that she was a prostitute).

Despite its best attempts to minimize the significance of women in the created order, Advent is chock-full of concepts that are very much a part of the experiences of many women. Although the church has spent little time reflecting deeply and expansively on the images of pregnant women in scripture, such as Mary and Elizabeth, these stories offer meaningful and rewarding opportunities through which all Christians should consider their lives of faith.

As I suspect both Mary and Elizabeth experienced, pregnancy can be amazing and wondrous, but it can also be difficult, uncomfortable, and unpleasant. It's difficult to describe what it's like to have an actual human being growing inside one's body. It's miraculous and mind-boggling. But, pregnancy can also include lots of other experiences as well, among them morning sickness (mine went on well beyond morning and lasted for many months), a body that feels increasingly unfamiliar, the middle of the night kicking of the growing child (why the middle of the night?), and exhaustion.

Then, there's the actual giving birth part. It's fascinating to me how churches focus so heavily on the Christmas story, yet somehow manage to leave out the giving birth part. All of a sudden, that young pregnant woman, sent off to a foreign place, ends up in a manger (according to Luke) and then, in the blink of an eye, the baby has arrived! As if somehow because she's given birth to the Son of God, Mary escaped all of the reality of the birth process. Not likely.

Giving birth, for most women, is truly remarkable. For so many, it's a life experience that defies description. Yet, giving birth is also painful, difficult, and messy. And, as every well-prepared woman can share, birth has a mind of its own. No matter how many of those "prepared childbirth" classes you attend, birth has a way of making sure you know that you cannot truly be fully prepared for all of it, nor can you be in complete control. Birth is unpredictable.

These are all important and significant dimensions, as well, of the Christian faith. Faith is wondrous, amazing, joyous, captivating, and emotional. Faith is also difficult, uncomfortable, exhausting, painful, messy, and unpredictable.

Advent is a wondrous time for not only welcoming, once again, a seemingly well-known Savior, but also inviting and pondering those aspects of our faith that are little more complicated, and a little harder to define or articulate. The realities of pregnancy and giving birth are great resources in helping us understand what it means to be people of faith. In the rush of the season, take a moment or two to reflect on the range of the experience that is faith—joy and pain, wonder and discomfort, hope and messiness, love and unpredictability. And everything in between.

Pregnant women have something important to teach us. New life is not generally the neat and orderly affair we would like it to be—and that's an amazing, incredible gift. Happy Advent.

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