

On Mary and Elizabeth

December 12, 2021

Gestating

Did you know that female bears often give birth while hibernating? I recently came across an article about this, written by Tara Owens of Anam Cara Ministries, the founder of a spiritual direction collective outside of Colorado Springs. She reflects:

“They don’t eat or drink for the entire six months or so, but they do gestate and birth cubs! They enter hibernation with the seeds of life already in them (mating season is in the summer), but the embryo doesn’t begin to develop until the mother enters her long rest. Her body temperature and heart rate lower as she sleeps, but she is growing new life inside. She gives birth and her baby (or babies) find nourishment by nursing, often for two whole months before she fully awakens!

“Now, something in her knows that she has given birth, but by the time she wakes up fully to reenter life in the world, her babies are months old already! What would that be like, to emerge from winter’s long sleep with literal new life walking back out with you?!”

Owens goes on:

“This can be a picture of what happens in our seasons of rest, too. We may not even know we have the new life inside when we enter into a long season of seeming quiet, dark rest. We may not even **want** to enter this season. It looks like barrenness to us, sometimes, this rest, this hibernation. But, imagine: even as we fully enter into the deepest of rest (willingly or unwillingly), life grows inside. We may not even realize the incredible work of creation going on in us until we actually give birth, and we may not **fully** recognize it until months in, when we can name this new life that has emerged with us into a new season!”

I think that part of why this reflection struck me so powerfully this year, is that, in some ways, our collective experience of pandemic has been a hibernation of sorts, as we have had this forced experience of staying home and turning inward. As Owens notes, seasons of dark and rest aren’t always what we would choose, and they often feel barren, but as we continue our season of preparing for Christ to be birthed in our lives, as we look this week at the role that Mary played in the birth of Jesus, this image of new life growing within us, perhaps even without our knowledge, can be powerful. Indeed, even in this season that appears barren and fruitless, there is something gestating within you, there is life knitting itself together in the depth of your being, whether you realize what it is or whether you won’t recognize it until you emerge from your cave and blink back the sunlight with your little pandemic-cubs toddling alongside you.

When I was little, one of the ways that I would defer bedtime was by extending my prayers. Part of the prayers my parents taught us was to end our evening prayers by naming people we would like to pray for. We would start out, “God bless Daddy and Mommy,” and then name our siblings and pets. As I grew up and caught on to the pattern, I realized that if I kept naming more

people, I could stay awake! Oh, how I loved to keep that list going! Every neighbor, every distant cousin, every stuffed animal and character in a book would be lifted up in prayer. This exhaustive benediction probably only delayed bedtime by a minute or two, but oh, how delicious it felt.

Fast forward to praying now with my own daughter. You can imagine how this momma pastor's heart swooned yesterday when Josie clasped her hands together in prayer on her own for the first time last night. We've been saying her nighttime prayers since she turned one and started sleeping in her own room, but up until this point, I've been clasping her little hands together. Last night, when I pulled her onto my lap and she clasped her hands without me doing it for her made my voice catch in my throat. Like my parents taught me, we end our prayers naming all of the people we want to ask God's blessing on. Like my parents taught me, we lift up family and neighbors and friends. We name you all, especially when you're going through great heartaches or experiencing joys.

But unlike the ending I was taught, "and God bless everyone who loves me," Josie and I pray, "and in a special way, dear God, we ask your blessing on everyone, especially those people who don't have someone to pray for them." It's a subtle shift, but in starting this pattern now of both de-centering herself and remembering the lost and lonely and least, hopefully I am, in a tiny way, helping Josie to claim her place in the long line of the descendants of Mary, the long line of people who hear her prayer that we read today, in which she proclaims, "My soul magnifies the Lord," and then goes on to name mercy and compassion and justice as the fruits of that blessing.

Part of what I'm trying to do as I sow the seeds of mercy and compassion and justice in Josie by praying with her every night not only about those who have joy and who love her but also about those who struggle and grieve and are alone, is my momma pastor's version of hyperphagia, the increased consumption of nutrients that bears take on before they hibernate. By starting the pattern of praying not only about love and kindness, but also mercy and compassion and justice, my hope is that an embryo of Christ will one day be nourished inside her, perhaps even as she hibernates, even without her being aware.

Tara Owens, whose article on bears giving birth amidst hibernation as a metaphor for the spiritual activity going on within us amidst pandemic, goes on:

"as we consider going into a season of hibernation, of somewhat 'enforced' rest, wonder a bit with God about what new life might be already planted. What might be nurtured – with or without your full awareness – in the coming season? What new life do you dream might emerge with you in the spring? If you are a person that has a hard time saying 'yes' to rest, what would it be to lean into this process, knowing you might even birth something new in the midst of it? How might you prepare (since it is out of the mother's stores that the cubs are nourished)?"

Running

Along with this reflection on gestating and nurturing and nourishing the seeds of a Christ life inside of us, my prayer this week has also drawn me to the beginning of our Gospel passage

in which we hear of Mary going “with haste” to her kinswoman Elizabeth’s village after learning that she was pregnant. We all know that an unexpected pregnancy, whether in the year 4 B.C.E. or in the year 2021, can be world-altering, life changing.

Friends, if gestating the seeds of a Christ life inside of you doesn’t resonate with you, then, instead, I encourage you to cultivate a life toward which Mary would flee. Maybe you’re not called to bear Christ yourself, so if you’re not, fashion yourself as someone who would be hospitable when a terrified 14 year old pregnant girl shows up on your doorstep. If you’re not called to be Mary, be an Elizabeth. Be someone who, rather than being suspicious and judging, rather than needing to know all of the hows and whys, revels in the bravery and courage of the one who is fleeing to you. Be someone who, rather than needing to control the outcome, recognizes and affirms the life in front of you.

Conclusion

Friends, if you use an Advent calendar, you know that we’re halfway through this season. As we continue to prepare for Christmas, my prayer this week is that the seeds of Christ’s peace, joy, justice, and love will grow and flourish within your being, even if you’re barely aware, and that, like Elizabeth, your life will be a welcome respite for those who flee the storms of life.

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