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Theme: "Gifts"

Sermon: "**Babies Are Babies**"

December 20, 2015

Call to Worship

"Somewhere, something incredible is waiting to be known," wrote astrophysicist author Carl Sagan who passed away on this day nineteen years ago. "Somewhere, something incredible is waiting to be known."

It's the season of impatience – a time when we've been waiting for a while now, and we are ready – ready for our turn in line, ready for the days to lengthen, ready for the traffic to move, ready to see Star Wars, ready for a snow day, ready for vacation, ready for the packages to come in the mail, ready for people to arrive, ready for Jesus to arrive, ready for Christmas to happen! Ready for Christmas to be over!

Advent is about waiting, and we've been waiting now for a while, believing that somewhere, something incredible is waiting to be known. We must wait a little longer. Maybe a lot longer. Maybe for the rest of our lives. Or maybe, we can just know today, and trust that something incredible has arrived, here, now.

Reading: *Eternal Sunshine*

From "Sun," a poem written by early-stage dementia patients during a workshop hosted by the Purchase, NY chapter of the Alzheimer's Association. Gary Glazner, a New York-based poet and founder of the Alzheimer's Poetry Project, led the group in creating a poem about the sun. The lines of the poem are comments by the participants in the original order.

Warm.
Bright.
Hot.
Light.
Different throughout the day.
That's a hot container.
I have to bend over the tools and make it go where I want to.
Come here, sunny.
Like a hot shower or a hug.
Smells like an ocean breeze.
Smells like an orange.
Don't leave tangerines out.
Sometimes it could be a grapefruit.

Hot as the dickens.
Warm as a pussycat.
The sun at dawn is bright as a new baby.
Even if it's a girl?
Especially if it's a girl.
Babies are babies.
I guess I have to wake up earlier.
Tastes like orangeade.
The sun at noon is bright as fire.
Lime in a coconut.
Feels like a smile.
Sounds like a kiss.
Midday like a burning fire.
Hot, uncomfortable.
Need your shade.
And your suntan lotion.
And your air conditioner.
The sun is setting.
Who tastes the setting sun?
The midnight sun is black as tar.
The sun tastes our death.
Who looks out the window for the sun at midnight?
We could look for the moon.
We could chop it up into sections, like an eclipse the shape of the sun on the moon.
Brilliant minds, we ought to turn them on.

Sermon: "Babies Are Babies"

"This has been the weirdest and hardest experience of my life. I am glad I did it, I'm glad it's over, and I am not doing it again."

This past week I took a trip up to Maine to visit Laura, one of my best and oldest friends. These words were some of the first she said to me when I walked through the door.

"Laura," I replied, "This is far from over. In fact, from now on, it's never over."

"Yeah, I know, but being pregnant and giving birth is over, and that's enough for me right now."

Ten days ago Laura gave birth to Mallory, her first, and potentially last, child. The baby is, well, a baby. A hungry, pooping, sleeping creature, smaller than Laura's cat. Mal is pretty much motionless aside from his curling little fingers, squinting eyes, and puckering lips. He's cute and warm. Babies are babies. And Laura, thankfully, is still her usual wound up, straightforward, New Englander self. Friends are friends.

"There is so much they don't tell you about pregnancy and giving birth, Hillary. SO MUCH. Pushing?! Do you know what "pushing" is?"

"Well, In Grey's Anatomy it looks like you just sort of grunt and do some serious kegals, and 10 minutes later, voila baby!"

“I KNOW RIGHT! NOT TRUE! Pushing is like doing advanced pilates for hours, after you’ve run a marathon, and you can’t drink water, you have to hold your breath, and you’re having the worst cramps of your life. Had any one told me that I was going to be doing pull ups and squats after being in labor for 30 hours I would have signed up for Crossfit nine months ago.”

Instead of getting a gym membership last March, Laura, in her usual fashion, bought some staedtler pens and a sketchbook, and got to work drawing. Laura is a graphic artist, and conveys most of her emotions, opinions, and daily experiences through comic strips. When she and I spend time together, often her response to stories I tell is “Oooh that would be a great comic,” and my response to her stories is, “Ooh that would be a great sermon.” Thus, it seems fitting that on the 4th Sunday of advent, as Virgin Mary feels some extra cramps, and Jesus’s head drops a bit, I write a sermon about Laura’s pregnancy comics.

“All I want now, is what I’ve wanted all along during this process,” Laura explained to me, “I want to make a comic book about pregnancy for women who are pregnant. I just want them to know that even though no one ever talks about it, most of the weird stuff that happens to you – to your body, to your brain, to your whole friggen life - is *totally normal*.”

If you look at the comic blog that Laura’s been keeping since the summer, *Unexpected: Misadventures in Pregnancy*,¹ she seems to be accomplishing her goal. Scrolling down the website, a person can see sketch after sketch about Laura’s “normal” pregnancy. She shares stories about her extremely itchy belly – the result of her torso skin being stretched so tight, her heart burn that is only soothed by chugging quarts of milk, her suddenly animal-esque body odor, her inability to sneeze without peeing, and the many, many physical and emotional consequences of being constipated. There are also a number of comics about her being pregnant and still trying to live her usual life: sketches about being cat-called more than ever before by men, her inability to fit into booths at restaurants, being unable to go out in public without strangers touching her and commenting on her body and her activities, and even one about her semi failed attempt at being a gypsy with a crystal ball stomach for Halloween.

Despite the fact that I have never been pregnant, and as of now have little desire to have children of my own, Laura’s blunt, matter of fact portrayal of her normal pregnancy make me feel free and understood. I can only imagine the effect her comics might have on a woman who is actually pregnant.

“Somebody’s gotta demystify this whole ordeal,” Laura told me, “It’s only fair to women. We’re animals, there is no voila – suddenly we have babies and families. It’s messy and smelly and rough and full of expletives and growls. Did I tell you I started growling in labor? What’s normal for us is there is no normal. I can’t wait til I can start pumping breastmilk and start drawing again. I have so much material!”

Laura was nursing, holding Mallory with her right arm as she righteously explained her call to action. Her left arm was limp at her side. She sprained her shoulder while “pushing” during birth.

¹ <http://apregnancycomic.tumblr.com>

The comics are so great, but Crossfit still might have been a good addition to Laura's pregnancy process.

On people's birthdays I can't help but think of their mothers. Since Christmas, for some, is essentially a birthday celebration, I can't help but think of Mary this time of year. In preparing to lead worship today I read the two biblical birth stories of Jesus in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. There wasn't much about Mary's birth process in them. It was kinda of depicted in the style of Grey's Anatomy.

Matthew doesn't give any details of the birth at all, just that Joseph had a dream about it, and when he woke up he took Mary as his wife and when she gave birth, they named the child Jesus.

Luke reads: "While Mary and Joseph were in Bethlehem, the time came for her to deliver her child. Mary gave birth to her firstborn son. She wrapped him in cloth and laid him in a manger."² Voila, baby Jesus!

I know that the vagueness of Biblical stories bothers some people, but I appreciate it. It leaves space for creativity, curiosity, and personal translations. Sometimes these are dangerous, but sometimes they're fun. While reading the gospels alongside Laura's comics, I couldn't help but think about Mary burping with heartburn, scratching her belly, growling and smelling like an animal. I imagined her cursing Joseph, and God, and daring Gabriel to come back down so she could give him a piece of her mind. I imagined Mary being upset with the way her body looked and felt, and having to stop and go pee every 20 minutes along her trek to Bethlehem with Joseph. I imagined Mary being real. A real woman, a real mother, a real human trying to do the best she could to remain calm in the crazy world of genocide, war, refugees, and religious violence that she lived. I imagined her having a hard time with it all. And it was liberating, and it made me feel understood. Mary was a strong woman, a messy woman, a hurting woman, a normal woman. Like me, like you. She had to be. We have to be.

I've been inexplicably drawn to the Virgin Mother, since my elementary Catholic school days. I wear a miraculous medal around my neck that I found in a thrift store jacket I bought in college. My apartment is strewn with devotional icons to her, including a three foot tall statue, the kind people put out on their front lawns that I keep prominently displayed on our living room coffee table. It's a good conversation piece.

One of the first benefactors of my Mary icons, was my maternal grandmother, Hermance Collins. Frenchie Grandma, as I called her, because she was Quebecois and spoke often in broken English. She was very kind, very Catholic, and loved me a lot. She always had gifts for me when we visited, usually candy and a rosary or small statuette of Mary or Jesus. The candy, of course did not last long, but my mother and I managed to keep many of the religious objects to this day. My favorite has remained the same since my childhood: a glow in the dark Mary with matching glow in the dark finger rosary. For, you know, those especially dark nights of the soul.

² Luke 2:6-7, NRSV

Sadly, despite these vivid early images of my grandmother, most of my memories of her involve an Alzheimer's unit. Frenchie Grandma lived a long time. She died a couple weeks after her 101st birthday, and suffered from severe Alzheimer's for over a decade before she passed. Once the disease took hold of her mind in her 80's she declined quickly. By the time she was 90 or so, she no longer recognized my mother or me, she spoke only in fragmented French, and no longer had teeth because she kept losing her dentures and the staff gave up with them. The only thing that Frenchie Grandma consistently remembered was our dog, who we brought along when we visited her, and another Alzheimer's resident named John, with whom she had a romantic fling in her mid-nineties. Sadly she out lived him by a couple years, but while it lasted, their courtship, which consisted of sitting next to each other, holding hands, smiling and mumbling, was a sweet sight for all. #LoveWins



Frenchie Grandma, John, and our dog, Tally

I was a senior in high school when Frenchy Grandma finally died, and at the time the whole scenario was strange and distant feeling. She had been so far gone for so long it felt like the Alzheimer's was contagious between us. She didn't know who we were, we didn't know who she was. Looking back on it now, I think more and more about my mother, an only child like me, and what it must have been like to have her mother not recognize her, push her away when she came close like a stranger, and cry and yell in her arms. Over the course of my grandmother's struggle with Alzheimer's, there would be these moments when suddenly her eyes became clear, her face gained an expression, and for a second she was back with us. As soon as that realization hit her she would break down sobbing, and then, seconds later, her eyes would cloud and she would disappear again. I think now of those moments and what that must have felt like to my mother. To have and lose her mother in matter of minutes, again and again. In her last years of life my grandmother was a baby, and my mother became her mother. Feeding her, cleaning 5

up after her, giving her shelter, attention and care. And when my mother came home from being with her, she cried, like a baby. It was weird and hard. It was normal.

One way of generating compassion in Buddhism is meditating on motherhood. Some Buddhists imagine that since we've been reincarnated so many millions of times, that at one point or another everyone on the planet has been our mother, and likewise in another incarnation we have been their mother. Understanding everyone as our mother, ideally, causes us to show care and gratitude towards others. Imagining everyone as our child, we feel compelled to prevent them from suffering, and show them love and patience.

It's not easy to do, but that's normal. Learning to love and care for one another is the weirdest hardest experience of our lives. Love is not easy. But it's necessary. It's a gift to receive love, sure. It's even more of a gift – a talent a skill - to be able to give it.

In our reading today, one of the writers of the poem, a person with Alzheimer's, says that "The sun at dawn is as bright as a new baby." I don't know what Laura would say about that, and she's been up *a lot* at dawn with her new baby lately. I will say though, that the love between Laura and her baby, love that I saw as she paused between sentences to gaze at him, was pretty bright.

I also see now, that when my grandmother turned into a baby and my mother became her mother, that love too, was bright.

Warm, bright, hard, light.

In this season of families, this triathlon of holidays, it's important to remember that it's normal to not feel normal. To not know your place in your family, to not have the experience written in the books, shown on movie screens, or talked about at parties. Holidays are weird and hard, and many people are glad when they're over. Remember this, family happens, lots of things happen, and it's not always easy. But I ask, that you try to give love this season. Just try, and see what happens. Just try and see if that by giving love, suddenly, you receive it. If that's too much, just look for love, and see what emerges in the world around you.

Bright love, we must receive and give it.

Brilliant minds, we ought to turn them on.