

“Busy Being Born”¹

I.

I’ve been thinking a lot lately about babies and birth. I’m not sure why, exactly. Maybe it’s all the books I’ve been reading, or the classes I have been taking or the advice that so many of you have so thoughtfully imparted. Maybe it’s the fact that Mary Beth is pregnant, I don’t know, but these days I have got birth on the brain.

That is not to say that I have learned a lot about birth. I don’t think that I have. I’m not sure that I can. Birth is a messy and mysterious process. We have all been through it, but we know so little about it. Even the experts scratch their heads. So far, all the books I have read and all the classes I have attended keep come back to a couple of basic points: here is what happens; we don’t really know how or why, try to remember to breathe.

And that could serve as a pretty good sermon for Pentecost. All of the mess and mystery of Acts chapter two makes a little more sense when we remember that this is, in essence, the story of a birth: ours. Today we recall and revisit that mighty act of God that brought us into the world. But this birth story has one little twist: it isn’t over yet. What commences in Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost goes on...and on...and on. God is not finished with us. We are still being born.

II.

Like most birth stories, this one begins with a long lot of waiting. The Book of Acts opens by recalling the resurrection of Jesus, and recounting that short, strange season when the Risen Christ would just drop in on the disciples from time to time. But when the day finally comes for the Risen One to leave them on their own, the disciples gather together and get their instructions: go back to Jerusalem...and wait.

So they do. They trudge wearily back into the city, climb the stairs to that cramped upper room, settle down and start to wait for whatever comes next. They probably do not know what they are waiting for. They probably have no idea what God has got in store. And as the days drag tediously along, they may not even realize that, in this waiting, their birth has already begun.

The Day of Pentecost opens like any other day. Assembled together again, they pray... and they wait...and they wait. But today will not end like all those other days. A violent wind. Tongues of fire. Everyone filled with the Holy Spirit, everyone speaking in strange and different dialects. It is messy, mysterious and very loud –everything we would expect a birth to be. And all the while, just down the stairs, an unwitting world has no idea what the Spirit of God has begun to bring forth.

But even that is about to change.

I have sometimes compared the 1st-century festival of Pentecost to the Iowa State Fair, but it's really more like Des Moines' downtown Farmer's Market in the month of May. It is a spring harvest festival that brings thousands of people into the center of the city, all of them celebrating the return of warm weather, all of them seeking out the first-century Palestinian equivalents of fresh asparagus and breakfast burritos.² According to the Acts account, all sorts of people have come to town for the festival: Parthians, Medes, Elamites and on and on, devout and faithful Jews from every nation in the known world.³

Of course, they cannot help but hear the clatter, clamor and ruckus that attend the church's birth. Rushing to the scene, in bewilderment they realize that these illiterate backwater peasants, these Galilean hillbillies, are simultaneously speaking in every known language.⁴ The crowd does not know what to think. Some simply scoff, suggesting that happy hour has come a little early today. But others have enough sense to pause and to ponder what all of this might mean.

They do not have to ponder for long. Just 15 minutes old, the newborn speaks its very first words. Peter stands up to preach. The sermon opens on a less-than-promising note, with recorded history's lamest-ever defense against the charge of public intoxication ("It's only nine o'clock in the morning"). But it gets better from there –much, much better.

What you see and hear today, says Peter, is easily explained: God keeps promises. Centuries ago, though the prophet Joel, God promised a day when the Spirit would be poured out on all flesh –sons and daughters alike, the old as well as the young. Today that promise comes true. Today the Spirit shows up.

Or, to put it another way: Happy birthday to us! On Pentecost, the church is born.

III.

But remember what I said before: this birth story has a twist. It did not end back there and back then. It has not ended yet. What began on Pentecost continues to this very day. We know this, in part, from reading the rest of the Book of Acts. It is the story of a church still being born, still being brought forth by the loving labor of God.

When we picked up the story this morning, at the beginning of chapter two, the fledgling church consisted completely of the same kind of people: Jewish Galilean peasants, all of them talking, eating, thinking and living exactly alike. But from the moment that the Spirit of God sends the newborn church out into Jerusalem's streets, it must confront other kinds of people, different kinds of people. 3,000 newcomers will join the church when Peter's sermon concludes -3,000 plucked from the complex and colorful crowd assembled on the Day of Pentecost. Before the sun has set on its very first day, the

church has already become far more diverse than the disciples would have ever dared to dream.

But God is just getting started. The rest of the book recounts one long story of a church being born. Again and again, the Spirit *pushes* the church, thrusting it beyond its comfort zone, out into the world to encounter and embrace all sorts of strange people. By the end of the Book of Acts, the church has become a bewildering collection of people who used to have nothing in common.

Acts may end, but the labor of God goes on. Here we are all these centuries later, and God has not given up yet. In every generation the Spirit has strained and struggled, poked and prodded, pushed and pushed and pushed to bring forth the church that God knows we can be. God is not finished with us. We are still being born.

So it should come as no surprise that life in the church is sometimes a struggle. Just look at our history: Christians have a habit of fighting with each other. We always have. Sometimes we fight about fairly petty things –the color of the carpet, the cookies for coffee hour. But some of our fights have been awfully important. We fought about slavery, social justice, civil rights, religious freedom, the role of women, the place of LGBT persons, the separation of church and state. When it comes to fights, we have had more than our fair share. But these are the birth pangs, the labor pains, the price of bringing us forth.⁵ And time and again, in conflict after conflict, a more faithful church has emerged. We strain and we struggle because a better church is being born.

I know it isn't easy, this business of being born. But just imagine what it must be like for God. And still God sticks with it. God refuses to quit. God will never give up on us until love's labor is accomplished, until the church of God's dreams comes forth at last.

IV.

I have noticed something about Plymouth Church: a lot of us don't really know what we are doing here. (And I'm not just talking about the staff). A lot of us wandered in here for one reason or another but we still are not sure we want to stay. Others of us have been here for so long, we no longer remember why.

So what are you doing here this morning? Let me offer an answer, and you can try it on for size: You are here to help. God has an idea, an image, a dream of what the church *could* be: a truly welcoming, truly inclusive, truly loving community where peace and justice are pursued, where enemies become friends, where everyone has a seat at the table.

That is God's plan for us. But we aren't there yet. And maybe we never will be until you find your place, until you play your part, in God's unfolding design. Maybe we can never be fully born without you.

Think it over. Take your time. But know this: there is already a place set for you at this table. You are always welcome here. But you have to be careful. At this table, we get swept up in something so much greater than ourselves. When we break the bread, when we share the cup, God's great labor goes on *-in us*.

We are busy being born. And the best is yet to come.

Thanks be to God.

Plymouth Congregational Church
United Church of Christ
4126 Ingersoll Avenue
Des Moines, Iowa 50312
Phone: (515) 255-3149 Fax: (515) 255-8667
E-mail: mmardis-lecroy@plymouthchurch.com

Notes

¹ The title, of course, comes from Bob Dylan: "That he not busy being born is busy dying," from "It's Alright, Ma (I'm Only Bleeding)" on the 1965 Columbia Records album *Bringing it All Back Home*. David Ruhe often refers to this line when teaching the Discover Plymouth New Member class and I have, rather shamelessly, stolen it from him. The role of birth imagery in the Pentecost story is suggested by Cousar et al in *Texts for Preaching: A Lectionary Commentary Based on the NRSV –Year C*. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), pp.341-350. My thinking on all of this is also indebted to Jean Janzen's wonderful hymn (adapting a text from the medieval mystic, Julian of Norwich) "Mothering God, You Gave Me Birth" (no 84) in *Hymns of Truth and Light*. (Houston, TX: First Congregational Church of Huston Texas, 2005).

² For background information, see the "Pentecost" entry in *The HarperCollins Bible Dictionary*. Paul J. Achtemeier, Ed. (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), p.826. For more about the Farmer's Market, visit: <http://www.desmoinesfarmersmarket.com/>

³ Of course, I would never dare to suggest that God planned Pentecost as some sort of publicity stunt –but that does seem to be what John Calvin says! *Commentary Upon the Acts of the Apostles*. Translated by Henry Beveridge. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1998), pp.72-92.

⁴ Probably a whole other sermon could be developed from Robert W. Wall's observation that the Spirit-inspired languages still seem to be spoken with a Galilean accent! *New Interpreter's Bible: Acts – I Corinthians*. (Volume 10). (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2002), pp.52-58.

⁵ The notion of birth as an image for our redemption is not at all original to me. We find hints of it in both Testaments of our Bible. In Isaiah 42:14, the prophet overhears God saying, "For a long time I have held my peace, I have kept still and restrained myself; now I will cry out like a woman in labor will gasp and pant." In the New Testament (Romans 8:22), Paul seems to draw on this tradition but also changes it, envisioning both the creation and the church as a woman in labor: "We know the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves..."