

Labor Pains
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The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC
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Isaiah 40:1-11

I have a feeling that this is going to be one of those times when I need to make apologies to you before I speak... so here goes.

I'm sorry that there are some of you in this room for whom what I say today will not be enough. There are some really big problems in our world today, which may be making you sad, or angry, or scared. I know that every time another mass shooting happens, I want to call my Newtown friends and beg their forgiveness that we... no, I... have not done more to address the public health menace and moral plague of violence.

Comfort and peace...

And I'm sorry that there may be a few among you for whom what I say will be too much. It feels to me like in these days, our world is expectant. Something new is about to born. Spoiler alert: I'm going to share with you some thoughts about what it is like to be pregnant, and for some of us in this room, that's a difficult subject. Many of us have struggled with infertility or IVF treatments, or have chosen to remain childless, or suffered a miscarriage, or gave their child a better chance at life through adoption, or took another's child into their home through foster care or adoption, or even made the difficult choice to terminate a pregnancy. I hold you in prayer.

Comfort and peace for you too...

The truth is, I'd rather not be here occupying this sacred space if we are once again going to be divided. So this morning, in this meetinghouse, I hope that you will remember our shared identity as children of God and our covenant with one another and that we will treat each other with care.

Comfort and peace... here goes.

One of the reasons there are 6 years between the births of our two children is that my first pregnancy was a really difficult one. I was a young newlywed, and truth be told, I wasn't that happy about it. At the time, we were still living in a tiny one bedroom apartment that I had occupied in my senior year of undergrad studies at UCONN. My job was tending bar in an Italian restaurant, and the smell of cigarettes made the morning sickness so much worse. My feet were swollen about an hour into my shift. But I tried to hide how I was feeling so that I wouldn't make people uncomfortable.

Eventually, my weight gain gave me away. While pregnant, the freedom to eat ice cream took hold and I found myself eating a pint of Ben & Jerry's many nights after my shift ended. And since milk would give my developing child better bones, I drank about 4 glasses of whole milk every day. People saw me coming, and assumed I was carrying twins. A spike in my blood pressure meant that for the final few weeks I was on strict bed rest. When it finally came time to deliver two weeks past my due date, there was an emergency trip down a bright hallway to surgery, with my husband distraught.

It was not a hallmark movie of what having a child was supposed to be like. The medical staff believed at the time that both I and the child I was carrying might die. And we nearly did. But we didn't, somehow.

After hundreds of years of living in the "Promised Land" the people of Israel were conquered and their kingdoms destroyed. The Northern Kingdom of Israel fell to the Assyrians in 722 B.C.E. and its people were either forcibly relocated to other parts of the world or they became refugees in the Southern Kingdom of Judah. In 586 B.C.E. the Kingdom of Judah fell to the Babylonian Empire: Jerusalem was sacked, the Temple was destroyed and many of its leading citizens were taken into exile.

All of that violence must have felt like the end of their relationship with God. And like so many other religions and cultures, they would probably disappear on the scrapheap of history. In the Ancient World, just about every nation and culture had their own deity, or their own particular "spin" on a widely known god. That deity was usually connected to the land in which you lived: blessing and protecting it. If two nations went head-to-

head, it was as if the two nation's deities were also "duking it out". If one nation defeated another, they believed that one god had defeated another.

Since the Babylonian god (named Marduk), had triumphed it was time for the people of Judah to accept the inevitable: Marduk was more powerful than the LORD. In other words, their story was done.

But instead, something truly amazing happened. Israel's God did not go away. The promise and relationship did not disappear in the exile. The God who had at one time rescued them from captivity was still speaking, moving and acting.

For centuries the prophets had been telling the people that there needed to be a change; that they needed to renew their relationship with God; not by going through the motions or paying "lip service" but with their whole being. If they didn't shape up, they would be defeated and exiled. And the warnings came true.

I imagine that many of the people at that time that either God didn't care or that God was too weak to do anything about it or maybe that God had abandoned them, and it was their own damn fault.

But there was Isaiah, in the middle of it all, speaking words of hope and comfort... reminding them of the covenant and God's deep love. I imagine they must have been skeptical that something new was about to be born.

We're skeptical too. We wonder if God is powerful enough to do anything. The situations appear too hopeless and the obstacles too great. The politics are too complicated. And we can't seem to have a civil conversation and make any real change without blaming one another.

Isaiah reminded the exiles in their hopeless situation that God was coming... in power and might. Isaiah's words are for us, also. It may be difficult to see or hear or touch, but I believe that God is still moving in our lives and in our world with the power of love.

Our time of being expectant... with all of the morning sickness, discomfort and fear that may bring... may not yet be over. So many of us are still in exile... we are exiled from a place or person that we love; exiled from health; exiled from safety; but our story is not yet complete.

The ancient promise is still valid... a road ahead can be created... beyond our disbelief, beyond our present circumstances, beyond the fog of hopelessness and despair itself. Something new and powerful is yet to be born. I've got to believe that, or I just might crumble in on myself. Maybe you do too.

Because something whispers to us that we have become midwives, and it is our job to help our world with her labor pains. Justice sharing, hope bringing, bridge building, compassion seeking, peace spreading... that's got to be our responsibility. Now, more than ever. And maybe it starts here for us, with the sharing of this bread and this cup to remember the one who still calls us to our work. Amen.