

Today's Gospel reading from John is one of the most well known verses of Scripture. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God..." et cetera et cetera. It is one of the most theologically dense and conceptually abstract scriptures in the whole Bible. Which also makes it feel rather far removed from the fleshliness of the Word made flesh that we celebrate at Christmas.

It is possibly dangerous to have someone whose previous professional life was as a nurse midwife preach on Christmas. Because I have sat with many women in labor and giving birth, and I know what is involved. There is pain and sweat and blood and real physical work to give birth. And that is what Mary experienced bringing Jesus, the Word made flesh, to birth among us. It is not conceptual and abstract - it is very, very bodily and very real.

Of course, Christianity has a long history of conceptual abstraction and theological density to keep us at a distance from our bodies. We tend to think of our "self" as separate from the body we "have" as if it were an object to be controlled rather than part of the essence of who we are.

And historically the church has done the same with Mary herself. The long history of Mariology done theologically "interesting" things to distance Mary from the rest of us humans by emphasizing how she is different by developing doctrines about her virginity and her Immaculate Conception. It distances us from the young woman Mary who said yes to cooperate with God in the Incarnation.

I suggest that it is helpful for us to re-emphasize at Christmas the human bodily-ness that God took on in Jesus' birth and life. That God encounters us and we encounter God in our whole being, body, mind, and spirit. We can find helpful resources for this in the prayers and poems of women expressing their spiritual experiences in very embodied language. One such psalm prayer in this vein is "As a woman in labour who longs for the birth" [from *All Desires Known: Prayers Uniting Faith and Feminism* by Janet Morley (1988, Morehouse-Barlow, Wilton, CT)].

As a woman in labour who longs for the birth,
I long for you, O God;
and as she is weary to see the face of her child,
so do I seek your deliverance.
She cries out, she pants, because her pain is great,
and her longing is beyond measure;
her whole body is groaning in travail
until she shall be delivered.

My soul hungers for you
as the child for her mother's breast;
like the infant who cries out in the night,
who waits in the dark to be comforted.
At night I will cry for your justice,
and in the morning I will seek you early;
for you O God are the source of my salvation,
and all my nourishment is found in you.

As a woman looks to her friend,
that she may open her heart and be free,
that her words may find understanding,
and her fears may be contained;
so do I look to you O God,
that you may search me and know my ways,
bringing me judgement and tenderness,
and sending me home released.

As the body of a lover yearns for her beloved,
So is my desire for your touch.
She cries out from her depths, she weeps,
and cannot speak
because of the beauty of her beloved.
You also have laid your hand upon me,
and I cannot forget your ways.

So I will cry for my Beloved, and I will not rest,
until I dwell in the darkness of her embrace,
and all my silence is enclosed in her.

This language of longing for God with our whole being is a poignant reminder that we continue to long for God to in our day. Medieval preacher Meister Eckhart wrote that “We are all meant to be mothers of God, for God is always needing to be born.” This Christmas, as we recall the fleshly birth of Jesus, may we too give birth to God in our world.