

A WOMB WITH A VIEW On Being Born Anew

Text: Psa 121: Gen 12:1-4a; John 3:1-17; Rom 4:1-5, 13-17

Longing for the Womb

Once long ago, by the miracle of God's grace, two cells came together in a marvelous way. They merged, they mixed, they divided, and divided and divided again till they eventually formed a miniature YOU. For month after month, you floated peacefully in a quiet space more comfortable than the finest waterbed. Sometimes you slept. Sometimes you lazily rolled over. Some speculate that you may even have had dreams. But for the better part of a good long while you simply rested... safe and warm... cushioned against the sharp edges of the world on all sides... constantly nourished without ever earning a penny or lifting a fork. It was prenatal Club Med! Ahhh... how sweet life was when you and I were in the womb!

Now, I've got this theory that most of us never got over that experience. At some level, perhaps subconsciously, we keep wishing we could return to that experience. We go through our lives trying in various ways to enwrap ourselves with education, money, comforts, connections, religion, whatever – in the hope that one day we'll fashion for ourselves a cocoon as good as that womb. We'll finally get to a place where our lives are pretty much set and stable, where our relationships are pretty much past the struggle point, where we float through the day smoothly, or our golf swing is grooved, or we're there on the beach with a Corona in hand and nothing but the sound of the lapping waves like the water of that wonderful womb.

Do I just need a vacation or can some of you relate to what I'm saying?! Let's face it: It's not just Hollywood's celebrity cribs or Madison Avenue's ad campaigns that portray life's goal as getting into a womb of one kind or another. Even religion can seem to be aimed at this kind of end. For example, Psalm 121 assures us that: **"The Lord watches over you... The sun will not harm you by day, nor the moon by night. The Lord will keep you from all harm"** (Psalm 121:6-7). It sounds like the Bible is saying that if we just trust and follow God in this life, he's going to make the experience more womb-like for us. But that misunderstanding probably explains why we often find ourselves a bit discouraged or even despairing, when Love's real plan for human thriving stubbornly reasserts itself.

Love's Real Plan for Human Thriving

What do I mean by "Love's real plan?" Well, the answer, I think, is at least partially found in the words of Jesus to Nicodemus in our lesson for today: **"You must be born again"** (John 3:3). Jesus is saying that the focus of your life, Nicodemus (or Dan or Darlene) is not meant to be on securing yourself in some comfy womb. It ought to be on surrendering instead to the uncomfortable process by which you are born into a larger room.

Think about this for a moment in terms of your own biological journey. God engineered the life process in such a way that over time your growth as a baby in the womb only took you so far. Though the walls of the world in which you lived were able to flex as you grew, they began to feel increasingly tight, till you were no longer able to move and turn as you'd previously enjoyed. And then, just when your universe could not seem to get any more constraining, the non-Caesarians among you began to feel the womb's walls squeezing you down.

Suddenly your heart rate went up as you found yourself being squeezed, almost violently, out of the safe familiar zone you had known for so long and into a far tighter and more traumatic place. For many of you, the walls of your world pushed you so hard through that narrow passage that your face and head were literally reshaped by the pressure. And then, when it couldn't possibly get any worse, a blinding light appeared, you felt something totally foreign take hold of you as never before. And you died!

You died from the womb. Something or rather Someone took hold of you, pulled you out of the only universe you knew, cut the cord that attached you to that life, and in that moment you died to the old world, the old reality, the old self. You would never be alive -- in the former sense of living -- ever again. You were dead! Yet what you couldn't really embrace in your little mind at that time -- what none of us could have embraced -- was that all the anxiety of leaving the old familiar space, and all that traumatic pressure that pushed us along, and even the death of sorts that met us at the end were not really final. They were merely the passage. The passage into an even larger womb. A womb where we had more room to continue growing.

A Series of Birthing Experiences

If you think about it, this "birthing process" -- this whole strange journey from old life to new life -- isn't confined to the mechanics by which we come into the world; it also describes the way we go through this world. I suspect that most of us would like to think that the trauma of being born was something we had to go through only once in life -- and preferably when we were too young to remember it. But it is a lot easier to avoid disappointment in God or discouragement in life if we will recognize that between our birth day and our resurrection day, God is going to take us through a series of birthing experiences, each designed to bring us to a place where we can grow larger and he can bless us more with the chance to be a blessing.

Test that claim against the story we read in Genesis 12. If ever there was a man who'd managed to construct for himself a pretty fine womb, it was the biblical character we know as Abram. Abram had a beautiful home in Harran, one of the garden spots of the ancient world. He enjoyed massive wealth and great prestige. But, **"the Lord said to Abram, 'Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you'"** (Gen 12:1). The average person would naturally reply: "Are you kidding? Leave here? Leave this whole cushy arrangement. My life could not be better, my influence could not be greater, than right here in this womb." But the Bible says that **"Abram went, as the Lord had told him... Abram was seventy-five years old when he set out from Harran"** (Gen 12:4). And with that step of faith, God grew Abram into Abraham. God made this good father into the great father of a vastly greater nation – Israel and the Church of Jesus Christ. God blessed Abraham with the chance to spawn the lineage through which came the Messiah through whom all people on earth can be blessed (Gen 12:2-3).

Let me say it again: Between our birth day and our resurrection day, God is going to take us through a series of birthing experiences, each designed to bring us to a place where we can grow larger and he can bless us more with the chance to be a blessing.

Test this insight now against your own life experience. How many times over the course of your journey have you known a period of what we might call "womb-time"? For a little while, maybe even a few years, you experienced a certain peaceful stability in your relationships, your work, or your faith; but then, one day, you to begin to feel a bit cramped and limited. The pressure builds till finally you begin to move; slowly, whether you wanted to or not. You find yourself forced down a difficult passage.

If you have ever made the move from childhood to adulthood, or from adulthood to parenthood, or from parenthood to midlife, and from there to retirement, then you know how traumatic that journey can be. If you have ever made the move from one vocation to a different one, or from a stagnant relationship to a revitalized one, then you know that the reshaping of identity, priorities, and assumptions that goes on in the birth tunnel can be very uncomfortable. If you have ever lost a loved one to death or divorce, then you know the loneliness of the struggle for new life, and how hard it is to trust that in the pain of passage there is really a plan.

But I promise you: There IS a plan. And maybe one of the reasons that God allows human life to start so traumatically is to give us a clue to that reality from the very beginning. Growth requires change and change involves struggle, but this struggle leads to new life. And those of you who have -- by

God's grace -- found new life at the end of one of those passages, are in a great position to encourage those who are not there yet. You know from experience that as difficult as the birthing process was, it left you -- at least for awhile -- in another, far larger room.

The Apostle Paul put it this way in his letter to the church at Rome: **"I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us." For we know that the whole creation has been groaning in as with labor pains... "For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God"** (Romans 8:18-19). For the promise and historical record of God is that when push comes to shove, he brings his children through the waters to new life.

In the Hospital of Hope

What would it take for this church to become known as a community of people impassioned with that confidence, and willing to share it? What if the word got out that the Christian community wasn't for those who'd "arrived," so much as for those who need to be born again? What if the church was a place where people knew they would find men and women who wouldn't try to hurry them through the process of passage, or make them feel guilty for crying out, or judge them when in their pain they kicked against the walls? I believe we could become even more of a hospital of hope than we already are and I'm asking you to help me make it so. Make the commitment to pursue greater life-change for yourself, even if it means letting him drag you out of some comfortable womb. Make the commitment to support the process of life-change for at least two other people in coming days -- by inviting them here, by encouraging them through a difficult life passage. **"Pursue life-change 4U+2."**

Let me recognize in closing that there might be something holding you back from assuming that kind of role. After all, it is possible for someone to be very religious in many ways, without ever getting around to making the fundamental change that frees him or her up for a different quality of life. It is possible to even have survived many of the tough passages of life, without ever having really submitted to the one key transition that makes all the others that much more victorious. Maybe you are a bit like the man whom Jesus met in our Scripture text for this morning.

Nicodemus, the Bible suggests, enjoyed all the comfort natural to someone who was not only a prestigious religious leader -- a Pharisee -- but also a powerful political leader -- a member of the Jewish ruling council (John 3:1). Over the years he had fashioned for himself a pretty warm womb of good works, fine things, and social influence. But one night Nicodemus found that he just couldn't float comfortably there anymore. The contractions of a new life had begun.

Maybe he'd found out that having wealth and influence no longer fed him completely. Perhaps he knew he didn't have the power in himself to fix his character or do his job or save his marriage. Maybe he was harboring some guilt that the inside of his life didn't match the pristine exterior. Perhaps he was realizing death would not make an exception in his case. We don't know for sure what was squeezing Nicodemus that night, though from the way he introduced himself to Jesus, it is pretty clear he believed that what was applying the pressure was the very power and presence of God (John 3:2).

Do you know what Jesus had to say to Nicodemus? It's the same thing he has to say to you and me. **"You must be born again"** (John 3:7) -- or as the Revised Standard Version has it -- **"from above."** Whether you have recognized it or not, alongside and beneath all of the other passages of your life, God has been progressively increasing the Pressure on someone listening to me right now to make the greatest transition of all. He sees how you have been spending your life in the comfortable womb of your own sufficiency. You've been depending on your own wisdom to guide you, your own goodness to justify you, your own strength to sustain you. But God knows that sooner or later that is not enough.

Not only are those resources not enough to keep any of us really growing through the passages of this life, but Jesus tells us that there will come a day when only those who have surrendered to a far greater Resource will be able to make the Ultimate Passage through death into the kingdom of God. And so what Jesus says to YOU, as he did to Nicodemus, is stop resisting God's contractions if you have been. If you have never left behind the stagnant womb of a self-directed, self-justified life, then now's the time. Surrender to a Spirit-directed, grace-justified life instead.

I know that is frightening, says Jesus. After all, the Spirit is like the wind or like the contractions of labor. You can't control when it comes. You don't know where it will take you. But the only way to enter the larger room of God's kingdom, is to let it push you where it will. If you want to see the best in this life, and one day find your eyes opening upon the brilliant glory of a vastly greater life, then make no mistake about it, it's time to let God pull you to Him. For you must... be born... again.

Let us pray...

Lord of all life, give us a womb with a view. Enable us to let go of the walls of whatever cocoon we've been living in and surrender ourselves to the breaking water of your Holy Spirit. Then draw us through whatever passage lies before us, bringing us to a newer and larger quality of life in your presence. Enable us to be for one another the spiritual midwives that assist you in bringing forth the new creations each of us is called to be. For this we pray in the name of Christ our Savior. Amen.