

This morning I'm going to tell you two related stories.

The first one took place seven years ago while I was living in Charlottesville, Virginia, where my husband Andy was studying for his PhD, at the University of Virginia. Together we were attending St. Paul's Memorial Episcopal Church in Charlottesville. At that point I had been in the formal process of discerning a call to the priesthood for about two years. The process of discernment is long, complex, and thorough--as it should be--and it begins internally and informally, then becomes "formal" when one starts to talk about it with the priest and others in the congregation.

So it must have been the spring of 2011 when I found myself visiting a meeting of the vestry, to talk with them about how I had been experiencing my call and to share with them reflections of others in the congregation who had processed my sense of call along with me. I was seeking their input and observations and also hopefully their support for pursuing the call further, namely by applying to seminaries.

As we talked, they offered me some thoughtful and practical questions, like, how would we afford seminary, especially since my husband was in grad school himself? How the next steps of my formation would align with Andy's career? And, since I was at that time early in pregnancy with our first child, how I would manage raising a child and preparing to be a priest?

Then the associate priest at that time, Ann, who had not spoken yet, said, "I have one thing to say. Emily, stay close to Jesus." The room got quiet. She continued, "This process gets turbulent: there are many people involved, there are many tests and hoops to jump through, many papers to write and deadlines to meet. You can feel like you're at the whim of it all. In the midst of that, no matter how much turbulence you feel, Emily, stay close to Jesus."

Flash forward to about six months after that, when I found myself beginning labor with said first child. I had been anticipating this. The baby had been due on Thanksgiving Day that year and here it was two long days after Thanksgiving and there had been no sign of labor yet--until, the contractions began! At first they were about thirty minutes apart, twenty minutes apart, ten minutes...and then five minutes, three minutes. At first these contractions felt like any other cramp or pain I'd ever had--no big deal, I've got this! (ha)

And then all of a sudden the intensity of the pain just shot up and it was on a totally new level--I had not experienced nor ever imagined that kind of pain before--and I called my friend Jen, who had agreed to serve as a doula with me, to be with me throughout all of this labor, having assisted many other women: "Jen, come over!" She was over within ten minutes. I said, "I've never felt anything like this before! It's so intense! I have to go to the hospital right now." She checks me out, does a few little tests, and I'll never forget what she said: "Oh, honey, you're about like ten percent into this. You're not going anywhere yet. We're going to be here together for awhile. Focus on your breathing." Indeed, amidst everything that I was feeling, she had me focus on my breathing.

Jesus, today, is talking about the "beginning of the birth pangs". He is talking to a few of his closest disciples who have come to him, as I called to Jen, "Hey, what's it really going to be like?" As I thought labor was going to be easier, I'm sure those disciples thought Jesus was going to offer a simple answer. But Jesus points out that natural disasters, civil unrest, earthquakes, famines--today we might add wildfires--these are but the beginnings of the birth pangs. Birth pangs of what? Of God manifesting in the world in a brand new way. Of God being born in our very physical life.

I do not believe that God wants any of this turbulence, turmoil, and pain to happen. I do not believe that God desires pain or loss for any of us. I do not believe that God is causing wildfires in California, that God causes earthquakes, that God causes destruction. I don't believe it's faithful to rationalize them in that way. We cannot rationalize around the fact, though, that pain and turbulence are part of our very lives, that no baby can be born without labor and/or other serious physical sacrifice on the part of the mother. We cannot rationalize around the fact that pain and turbulence are part of life itself, for some reason.

So what do we do? There are many things we could do, including examining our own lives to become aware of how or if we are contributing to problems that cause pain and turmoil for others. How might things that I do, that we do, in our lives here in Detroit affect whatever is causing the rampant fires in California? Even to pause and think about that takes patience, humility, and courage, much less to take the next step of how we might change our lives in order to lessen the suffering of our neighbors.

And first, most importantly, I'm remembering what Jen, my doula, and Ann, my priest, reminded me in those times of turbulence and uncertainty, and pain. What do we do first? We go deep inside. We remember to breathe, maybe we remind somebody else to breathe, and as we do so we recall that the Holy Spirit is already with us and in us, especially at these times when we feel at the whim of everything around us--precisely in this pain, uncertainty, and turbulence, personal and global. What do we do? We stay close to Jesus.

November 18, 2018, the 26th Sunday after Pentecost

Mark 13:1-8