

Day of Pentecost (Romans 8:22-27)

I got the epidural. As the pain receded, I felt an ache of disappointment settle in.

by [Katherine Willis Pershey](#) in the [May 16, 2012](#) issue



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By the time I was admitted to the maternity ward and lashed to a bed with an IV line, my labor had progressed. With each contraction I felt as though the pain would suffocate me. When the nurse suggested she should call the anesthesiologist, I reluctantly agreed.

I hadn't wanted to have an epidural. I wanted to have a natural childbirth and, what's more, to have a spiritual experience. But the fierce woman who had dared her body to go into labor by weeding in 90-degree weather had disappeared. By the time the anesthesiologist arrived, I was whimpering for relief.

The epidural numbed only the right side of my body, leaving me with half the pain still at full strength. In the last moments of my labor I was groaning groans of biblical proportions. Then a baby girl was born, and the excruciating pain ended.

I have given birth to two babies now, and both times I felt an ache of disappointment settle in as the pain receded. The ache was weak compared to labor, let alone compared to the love I was feeling for the blessing in my arms. It's silly to be disappointed with your childbirth experience if it yields a living mother and a healthy child. As a woman living in a country where childbirth is relatively safe, I am privileged; the statistics for maternal health in developing nations are sobering. Still, I was disappointed—things had not gone according to my best-laid birth plans.

However hard we work spiritually and emotionally to prepare for the pain of childbirth, most of us find that during the toughest moments in childbirth, as my friend Allison said, "The pain gets *real*."

The pain gets real in Paul's letter to the Romans too. Imagine the entire creation experiencing the peak of labor's agony—it's overwhelming, almost unthinkable. And yet Paul's metaphor is frighteningly true. At times the contractions are subtle, and at times it seems as if life is contracting in pain: our suffering may be excruciating and unending. A spate of violence is followed by an epidemic of illness which is chased by a surge of natural disasters, and meanwhile someone's brother is betraying her and another's wife is leaving him. Paul readily admits that we do not see what we hope for. What we see, instead, are endless reasons to be hopeless.

This is the disturbing story line of suffering in the world. It is a story line that continues long after the Good Friday that was supposed to topple the old plot. It is a story line that continues to be repeated generations past the Easter Sunday that was supposed to transform the whole narrative. We maturely accept that faith does not function as a shield protecting us from sorrow, but still: *Why hasn't anything changed?* What is the point of the incarnation if flesh keeps burning, the point of the crucifixion if cancer keeps spreading, the point of the empty tomb if young black boys are steadily and tragically disappearing from their homes?

Worst of all, it seems that all this suffering is meaningless. I'm convinced that one of the reasons there are so many terrible explanations for suffering is that most of us would rather cling to a thin pretext for pain than be left with no explanation at all.

The pain of childbirth is meaningful because new life emerges through the pain. This is the hope Paul sets before the hard-laboring creation. It is inevitable: Christ is coming. The long-awaited restoration will be fulfilled. Our fragile selves, grief-stricken and raw-nerved, will be redeemed.

You can't write a birth plan for this. There are no effective interventions to avoid the worst of it, and any attempts to seek numbness will fail. Our only hope is just that: hope. Those who have witnessed the glory of God firsthand swear that we have reason to hope, and there is nothing we can do but take deep breaths and believe those witnesses.

Last summer I carried my newborn through an exhibit at the Loyola University Museum of Art in Chicago. I was struck by Janet McKenzie's painting *Mary with the Midwives*. Mary is in the middle of a labor contraction. I imagined that the two women kneeling by her side were whispering the affirmation in the childbirth manual *Birthing from Within*: "Labor is hard work, it hurts, and you can do it." A dove rests upon the halo surrounding Mary's head. At first I considered this a shorthand sign of Mary's blessedness. But then it dawned on me: there were not two but three midwives in the painting. One of them intercedes with sighs too deep for words: for Mary, for me, for all. The Holy Spirit is with us.