

Sunday, January 27, 2013: Luke 4:14-21

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Breast-feeding is quiet and holy work—rocking, comforting, studying each other’s face and skin-to-skin bonding. When it goes well (and God knows, it doesn’t always go well!) nursing is a sweet and beautiful thing. It’s sweeter than honey, the psalmist might say, sweeter than the drippings of the honeycomb.

That sweetness could calm almost any storm: hurt feelings, scraped knees, fatigue, frustration, hunger or sadness. And why not? Food and warmth, comfort and calm. What more could you want?

Well, maybe one more thing: a lullaby. A favorite of ours was “This Little Light of Mine”—sometimes quietly sung, sometimes hummed. The music became another form of touch, of tangibly being together.

Our daughter is now five years old, and every now and then we catch a glimpse of her playing with her stuffed animals: brushing their teeth, reading to them, putting them down to sleep, waking them up again with kisses. Then she’ll pick up Honey, the floppy, caramel-colored giraffe she’s had since she was born, and walk over to the rocker, sit down and cradle Honey close to her chest.

“Do you want to nurse, Honey?” she’ll ask. The giraffe gives a floppy-necked nod, and then Maggie holds her close, rocking slowly and singing “This Little Light of Mine.” Hearing this from the hallway, we’re always tempted to gush—but for Maggie, the entire routine is nothing less than the vital, dignified, tangible business of caring, the gentle and luminous work of love.

In Italy, they call her *Madonna del Latte*, or Madonna of the Milk. If you look for her in Italian art, you’ll see her everywhere: mother Mary nursing the infant Jesus. Mary here is a personification of the church, one of the marvelous ways in which God is letting down the sweet milk of love, grace, tenderness, mercy and healing into the world.

No wonder those medieval artists painted her, carved her out of stone, prayed to her and painted her again. Here is an icon of self-giving, of nourishment and care, that is deeply human and humanizing. It's a kind of kenosis, self-emptying, without being self-annihilating. It's a physical, tangible, eucharistic form of love ("This is my body, given for you"), the kind of love Jesus proclaims not only at the end but also at the outset of his public ministry.

Filled with the power of the Holy Spirit and still wet behind the ears from his baptism, Jesus returns to his home synagogue in Nazareth and is handed the scroll of the prophet Isaiah—who compares God to a nursing mother (49:15).

And then, in front of his family, friends, youth group leaders, Sunday school teachers and all the rest who raised him, Jesus unrolls the scroll, finds the passage he has in mind and inaugurates his public, prophetic mission.

He declares the dawn of a new day, "the year of God's favor," and in the same breath commits himself to sharing stories and coffee at the shelter, attending Bingo night at the local prison, reading newspapers for the elders down at the community center. In other words, he claims an identity as one sent "to bring good news" to those who need it most. In that sense he claims a life of giving himself away, pouring himself out and so showing all who follow him how to become a way through which God is sending down grace for the sake of the world.

Moreover, he does all of this by leaning on his ancestors, our ancestors. This includes Isaiah, of course, but also his mother Mary.

Listen closely to Luke 4 and you'll hear echoes of Luke 1, that magnificent song that Mary (we imagine) used to sing as a lullaby to her firstborn son. When he wasn't swaddled up and lying in a manger, he was no doubt skin-to-skin with his mother, nursing away as she sang a lullaby about a good and gracious God who has brought the powerful down from their thrones, lifted up the lowly and filled the hungry with good things (Luke 1:46-55).

Yet even before Mary lifted up her voice, the song was in Hannah's mouth (1 Sam. 2:1-10). She sang it as she nursed the boy for whom she had prayed. She waited until he was weaned before she gave him to God and then, as she turned him over to a priest, gave thanks to the One who has fattened up the hungry, raised the poor from the dust and lifted the needy from the ashes.

This lullaby of love and justice has been cascading down through the centuries from the very beginning, passing from generation to generation. Its melody rises with the opening divine words of creation, and its refrain has been resounding ever since. It's a great symphony, a masterpiece of kindness, righteousness and hope—and its final movement has now begun, fulfilled in our hearing, audible in our singing whenever we join the happy chorus.

At our best, the Christian church is this kind of choir. The Spirit fills us. Jesus stands with us and within us. Should the door be left ajar, God our father and our mother will look in on us and smile, for we are God's children, anointed to the vital, dignified, tangible business of caring, the gentle and luminous work of love.