

Ambiguous labor pains

Preaching on biblical passages about labor and childbirth is important, but it's also dangerous.

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We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now (Romans 8:22).

This year at Vacation Bible School I told [the story of Jairus's daughter](#). My plan was to have one child pretend to "sleep" and then be raised up by Jesus. But it turned out that *all* the children wanted a chance to be Jairus' daughter. So around I went, taking the hands of "sleeping" children and touching their foreheads and saying something like, "Get up! Jesus makes you well."

As I went around raising these children and sending them off to craft sheep out of marshmallows, I could not help but think of all the children who will not be raised up. I thought of my friend who had recently miscarried. This week, I think as well of the little ones on Gaza's beaches and on our own borders. Pregnancy, birthing, raising children, losing them—all these acts leave me speechless.

Preaching on biblical passages about labor and childbirth is important, but it's also dangerous. One must remember that not all pregnancies are wanted, and not all women can experience pregnancy; that suffering is not a prerequisite for glory, and not all suffering ends in glory. Texts about labor suggest the hope that on the other side of suffering you will hold a beautiful, living child. But you might not.

You may instead hold the "products of conception" in a jar. You may hold a beautiful child who is fully formed, cold, and blue. You may not be able to hold your baby because she is whisked away to the depths of the NICU for lifesaving procedures. Or maybe you won't hold your child because you yourself will need lifesaving measures—and you may indeed lose your life from complications of pregnancy or childbirth, [as a woman somewhere in the world does every minute](#).

Labor pains are ambiguous. And ambiguity is hard.

And even when labor and pregnancy go "as planned," you know not whom you hold in your arms. This is your child, yes, but also God's. This tiny creature is a mystery of tissue, nerves, and stardust, leaving us with so many questions.

I don't really know what all these questions might be. I'm not even close to being a mommy yet. I can only use my imagination and dream of a day when I might hold God's child in my arms.

But I do know, from my many mommy and daddy friends, that this whole thing is ambiguous. You can read all the books, but there is no map for birthing and parenthood. You just find your way forward. I often look at wonder at my friends who are parents. How can you embark on such an unknown journey and face it with courage? How do you even begin to raise a little human being? I'm not a parent, but I am a pastor—and I often have similar questions as I look out into the congregation on Sunday morning. How do we even begin to build the Kingdom of God?

I love these labor verses. They are rich and feminine and powerful and raw. They are both strong and vulnerable; they are ambiguous. They give me great sermon material for a church facing difficult transitions and new beginnings. Even though we don't yet know *how* to be the church God needs us to be, we can be that church if we walk by faith.

At the same time, these verses terrify me. They say that I must journey without a map, that I must trust without knowing the result, that I must be prepared to experience suffering.

And isn't this usually the case with the gospel? It is a terrifying and humbling task to both live and preach the good news. The outcome is no more certain than that of birthing a baby. We don't have maps, just faith and hope.