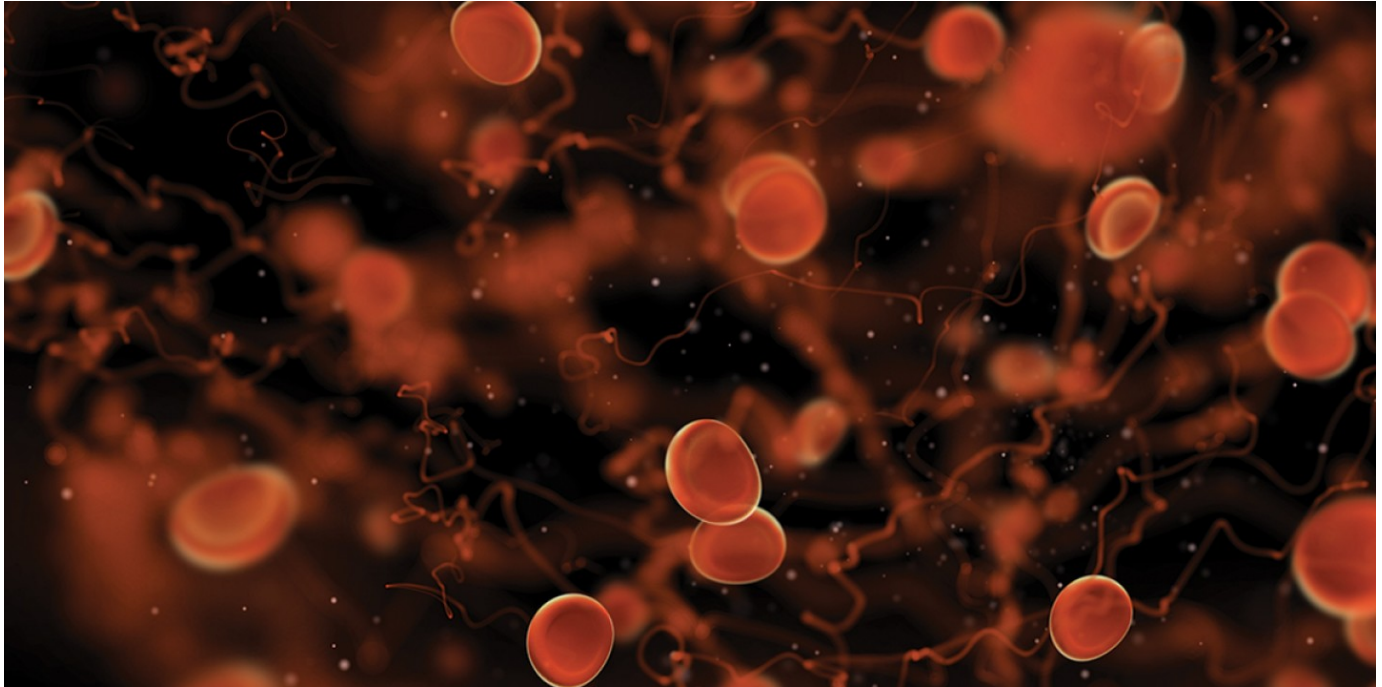


Bleeding in the pulpit

The Sunday I decided to tell the truth about my miscarriage.

by [Katie Murchison Ross](#) in the [April 6, 2022](#) issue



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It was Ash Wednesday of 2020. I was bleeding as I preached.

“The world calls us to a posture of pretending everything is fine,” I said, in remarks prepared before the bleeding started, “but Jesus calls us to the truth of confession and redemption. The truth will set you free. When we name mortality aloud, we become free to receive grace.”

I felt mortality in my body. It was the fourth day of bleeding; I knew my pregnancy was ending. And though I miscarried two days later, I did not tell the people at church. I kept pretending. I was conscious of the cognitive dissonance between my preaching and my example. Yet I could not bring myself to share.

Despite all the “come as you are” mottos, I’d long experienced church as a place where only a specific version of myself was welcome—the version that wears makeup and doesn’t curse or doubt. Besides, I am a pastor. I did not want to fall apart while the congregation looked on. What would that say about my leadership, my faith, my God?

Less than two weeks after my miscarriage, the nation shut down over the coronavirus pandemic, plunging us all into a deeper confrontation with our mortality. Pastors were not exempt. We worried about ourselves, about our congregants, about at-risk relatives; we lined up for virtual therapy sessions. Like many working parents, I grew discouraged trying to parent a two-year-old while working. My pregnancy loss grief compounded with each month’s negative pregnancy test. But I doubled down, certain my duty was to be the stable, guiding hand in the midst of so much fear.

I knew my pregnancy was ending. But I was not yet ready to tell people.

One gift of the pandemic, however, is that it has revealed our pretending to be untenable. As time wore on, I began to understand I wasn’t the only one struggling to conceal wounds. In pastoral phone calls and sidewalk visits, the truth of mortality was creeping out from its hiding places. Stuffing envelopes one day, I heard a grandmother’s grace-speckled story of infertility and adoption. On a park bench a few blocks away from church, I was honored with another member’s raw musings on doubt and shifting identity.

Each story was an invitation, a chance to wonder where my own heartbreak had company or where God’s grace might be breaking into my story. Each story was a gift, a reminder I was not alone. In each story was a sign of the presence of our human, weeping Christ.

I discerned it was time to share my grief, to embody the truth telling I had preached so many weeks before. I told my congregation about the miscarriage. It wasn’t long before the “me too” texts began to come: more holy moments of shared suffering and shared grace.

The pandemic made obvious what we’d always known but rarely practiced: that when we share our tears and failures openly, we become more real to one another, more connected. We become the broken, bleeding, holy body of Christ. I would argue that Jesus’ greatest sermon and greatest gift was his own bleeding. On the cross, our God became more vulnerable than we thought it possible (or appropriate)

for God to be. Willing to weep and suffer in solidarity with humanity, Jesus showed the world how deeply loved we are. Why shouldn't we reveal that love to one another in tenderly bearing our own suffering?

I had miscarried just as the world shut down, and I birthed my longed-for second child just as the world was starting to reopen. She arrived last May, amid the celebration of vaccines, shedding masks indoors, and reopening for in-person worship. Perhaps, it felt for a moment, the pain was past. We had made it. A child was born. Pandemic isolation was ending. Holding-it-together-until-Jesus-comes was finally paying off.

It felt like the pain was past. A child was born! But we never escape our vulnerability.

The truth is, we never escape our vulnerability as humans. We come from ashes and return to dust. In the weeks following my child's birth, the newborn oxytocin glow wore off, and I dealt with a postpartum breast lump scare and a particularly sleepless baby. The lump was likely related to breastfeeding, likely going to be fine, but my follow-up ultrasound wasn't for another six weeks and Google was no help. Pacing at 2 a.m., I became convinced I would die of cancer and leave two tiny daughters motherless. In that subrational, bodily trembling, faith in Christ felt distant; God could not assuage my fears.

I'd opened up to my congregation once, but our human experience of brokenness is ongoing. I'd have to continue leaning into truth telling. In August, I returned from maternity leave, committed to experimenting with how to invite others into an alternative way of being Christ's church, where those who bleed need not cover their wounds in isolation but might be embraced.

Like all experiments, some days went better than others. I prattled on too long to the office volunteer who inquired about how little my baby slept. Or I retreated back into a costume of calm and control. But one late-summer Sunday, I decided to mention, in a sermon on the ways we reorient ourselves by God's goodness in times of disorientation, that I was in the midst of my own health scare related to breastfeeding, that I was likely just fine but still scared, still turned upside-down.

The third ultrasound, the one that would clear me of all concerns and send me into sobs of relief, was scheduled for the following week. I didn't know the outcome yet. I did know the maxims: preach from your scars, not your open wounds; don't share so

much that you make the people worry about their pastor instead of hearing the gospel. And I wasn't sure I should say the word *breastfeeding* in a sermon.

But the model of our incarnate God is more powerful than any maxim. Jesus' vulnerability proclaimed, rather than distracted from, the love of God. I thought of all the other brave storytellers in my congregation who had welcomed me, and one another, into honest, broken, grace-filled life together. I gave thanks for them all. I took a breath and told the truth.

I was bleeding in the pulpit again. And to my relief, the truth I told was met with gentle nods, thanks, and attentive silence. I hope our mutual truth telling continues to grow, until anyone who shows up will know in an instant that this is a church where it is okay to bleed.