

Rivers of Living Water Welling Up Within

Address to Precious Blood Convocation 2010

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“Who will speak a word that will rouse them? I can, I must, I will. Will you?” Your theme is a rich and challenging one, that invites reflection on the call to prophetic leadership in response to the needs of the church and the world today, according to Precious Blood spirituality. The Gospel text you have chosen is most apt. I see six movements in this gospel story, and I will shape my remarks around them.

I. The Prophetic Call: A Compulsion to Speak

The story of Jesus’ encounter with the woman of Samaria begins with the remark that Jesus *had to* go through Samaria (v. 4). He had been baptizing in Judea and was on his way north to the Galilee. Although the shortest route from Judea to Galilee was straight through Samaria, any other Jew of Jesus’ day would have gone around, on the East side of the Jordan River, to avoid any contact with the hated “other.” The divisions were ancient and deep, with roots eight centuries old. Each side could recount endless offenses by the other. It was much easier to avoid one another than to risk a confrontation. It was also much easier to stay with one’s own kind than to expend effort at trying to reconcile their differences. An uneasy peaceful coexistence could be maintained with fences, walls, boundaries, avoidance.

Geographically speaking, Jesus didn’t *have to* go through Samaria. Prophetically speaking, he was compelled to begin a dialogue that would dislodge the first bricks in the walls dividing Jews and Samaritans. Like all true prophets, Jesus would have been reluctant to do this. He had plenty good reasons why not to respond to this call at this time. He was tired. He had been walking long miles and it was hot—high noon. He could also have said, “what good will one conversation do? Our people have been at each other’s throats for too long. It will take way too long to break down these animosities. And there are too many theological differences between us—they only use the Torah for their Scriptures, we also have the Prophets and the Writings. They think the place to worship is Mount Gerizim; we have our temple in Jerusalem. They think the coming Messiah will be a prophet like Moses (Deut 18:18); we think he will be a Davidic king. It will take way too long to work through all these theological differences.” Moreover, Jesus could have thought: I have people to teach, preach to, and heal up in the Galilee, where they will be far more responsive to my message. It’s a waste of time to try to talk to Samaritans. They’re never going to change.

True prophets are always reluctant to take on the mission to which God calls them. Moses, you remember, insisted that he could not speak well (Exod 4:10). “Find someone else,” he told God. Instead, God tell him to take his brother Aaron with him. God guarantees “I will be with your mouth and with his mouth, and will teach you what you shall do” (Exod 4:15). Not only that, Moses’ sister Miriam is also a prophet (Exod 15:20; Num 12:2). God says, “taker her

too—I love to work in threes!” Jeremiah also had a good excuse: he was too young (Jer 1:6). “No problem, we can provide on-the-job-training,” says God, insisting, “Do not be afraid . . . I am with you to deliver you” (Jer 1:8). Amos was a herdsman and a dresser of sycamores when God took him from following the flock and asked him to prophesy to Israel. He objected, “I am no prophet or a prophet’s son” (Amos 7:14)—I don’t have any “prophet-genes!” Once again, God says, “Go [any way and] prophesy to my people, Israel” (Amos 7:15). Isaiah objected that he was “a man of unclean lips,” living among “a people of unclean lips” (Isa 6:5). So God sends a seraph who touches his lips with a live coal, declaring that his guilt had departed and his sin was blotted out, which then allows him to respond to God’s invitation with the words, “Here am I, send me!” (Isa 6:5-8). In a similar way, Jesus’ mother objected to her prophetic call, saying what God was asking was impossible. Gabriel reassures her that with the power of the holy Spirit encompassing her, nothing is impossible for God (Luke 1:37).

Sometimes our objection to the work of prophetic dialogue is that we’d rather keep our grievance. I’m reminded of a time when I was a doctoral student at Catholic University and was living with other Dominican sisters in the men’s Dominican House of Studies. One day one of the sisters—I’ll call her Mary—overheard one of the priests say something about her that hurt her very deeply. Mary kept coming back to it over and over and over with us in conversation. Every mealtime we’d hear again how hurtful this was and how upset she was. Finally, when the rest of us couldn’t stand to hear about it one more time, we finally urged her to speak directly with the priest who had hurt her, and try to reconcile. She thought about it for a minute, and then declared, “I think I’d rather have my grievance!”

The Fourth Evangelist doesn’t preserve for us how Jesus discerned the prophetic call to begin the dialogue with Samaritans, nor the objections Jesus likely raised. The story begins with his response: he knew he *had to* go to Samaria, and so he does. The story at first blush seems to be an exchange between two individuals, but typically in this gospel, individual characters are representatives for an entire group. So Nicodemus, for example, represents all who were struggling to understand Jesus’ message; Thomas voices the doubts of all those in the fledgling Christian community who needed tangible signs; Mary Magdalene at the tomb, embodies the whole community of beloved disciples, as they seek for how to encounter Christ when he is no longer physically present with them. In like manner, the woman from Samaria represents her whole people with whom Jesus and his people want an renewed relation.

For Reflection:

Who are groups with whom we live, minister, interact with, who have deep-seated divisions?

Are they: community members who have different theologies?

Different camps in the church with varying interpretations of Vatican II?

Different racial & ethnic groups in our parishes, schools, or various places of ministry?

People of another generation, e.g., young people who speak a different language from their elders and communicate through technology in ways that older generations do not understand?

It is easier to stay in our own camps, to talk to those who think like us.

Who will take the first step to engage in prophetic dialogue?

Who will speak a word that will rouse them?

What objections do we have that God wants to overcome?

II. Beginning the Dialogue

Jesus takes the first risky step. He situates himself at a well. The place to begin the dialogue is a place of mutual thirst. Jesus and the woman both want water. But who will give the water and who will accept it? What kind of water? On whose terms?

The woman comes to draw her water from her own people's well. It has been their source of life from the time of Jacob and Rachel. Jesus asks if he may have a drink of her water. And so the exchange of gifts begins. There is suspicion and mistrust at first. What is he doing there? What does he really want? It will be a long, slow process of deep listening and mutual revelation, a dance between desire and fear, wanting peace, while afraid of being hurt in this risky endeavor.

It has to be a two-way street. If she is willing to give him a drink of her water, he wants her to ask him for some of his water. And she does. This exchange of gifts, results in a gift of God, a gift of living water for both and for both their peoples. Not "dead" water that stagnates in a cistern, but free flowing water that gushes up from living springs, enabling life and fecundity in places that have been parched and barren. It starts, though, as a slow drip, one drop at a time, of trying to understand from the other's perspective, of genuinely trying to seek the good of the other. Not an easy stance to adopt. Both have to let go the desire to get the other to convert to their point of view. Both have to be able to give and both have to be able to receive from the other. Neither has the fullness of the living water themselves; it is a gift of God, that springs up as each becomes willing to give and receive from the other.

For Reflection:

Who will speak a word that will rouse them?

What does it take to be the one who will take the first step?

How does one cultivate a stance of deep listening and mutual exchange?

III. Going Deeper

Once the dialogue has begun and once they each begin to long for the water the other has to offer, then begins the difficult work of coming to mutual understanding over many of the flashpoints that divide. In the next part of the exchange between Jesus and the Samaritan woman, they talk about worship. At the heart of so many of our differences is how we think about God and how we express our faith in God. We have made great strides in Ecumenical and Interreligious Dialogue in the last few decades, but great challenges to continue this work remain. No less challenging are the difficulties over worship in our own Roman Catholic communities. In what language will we worship? Spanish? Vietnamese? Polish? Will we call God Father or Mother? Or something else? Will there be lay Eucharistic ministers? Girl altar servers? Women lectors? Will the homily be based on the Scriptures? Or will it be an instructional treatise? With what kind of theology?

Knowing that he's stepping into a hornet's nest, Jesus broaches the topic of worship in a metaphorical way. He asks about the woman's husband. As Sandra Schneiders has shown, in

her analysis of this text in her book *Written That You May Believe. Encountering Jesus in the Fourth Gospel* (rev. ed.; New York: Crossroad, 2003), the question about the woman's husband is part of a highly symbolic and theological exchange, and should be understood in this way, not as a literal query about the woman's sexual history. In Hebrew, the word *ba'al* refers to both "husband" and "God." Moreover, in the Hebrew Scriptures there are many instances, especially in the prophets, where God is spoken of metaphorically as Israel's husband. Most often it is in the context of a prophetic call for Israel, the unfaithful wife, to return to her long-suffering faithful spouse, Yahweh. Why the woman is always portrayed as the wandering one and the husband always as faithful, when in patriarchal cultures it is almost always the opposite, is food for another whole lecture! To stay with our story, when Jesus says to the woman, a representative of the Samaritan people, "you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband," it is an allusion to the five false gods of the Assyrians that the Samaritans began to worship after the invasion in the eighth century B.C.E. (2 Kgs 17:13-34 makes reference to this). "You have no husband" signifies that Samaria is not in right relation with God. The woman recognizes the way Jesus is using this metaphor, and exclaims, "I see you are a prophet!" (v. 19). They then continue the conversation, speaking not only about who to worship, but where, and then what it means to worship in spirit and truth.

Each speaks their truth, knowing that neither has the whole truth. Truth is something that cannot be possessed by a single individual or a single group; in fact truth is something that cannot be possessed at all. I may speak what I call "my truth," but I do so knowing the limitations of my ability to perceive and convey truth. Truth emerges in the dialogue as the object of mutual seeking. For Christians, Jesus himself is Truth incarnate. For us, it is in listening to and emulating him, that we learn and embody Truth.

Both Jesus and the woman are letting the Spirit lead them in this dialogical dance. In talking with Nicodemus, Jesus had told him that the "Spirit blows where it wills . . . and you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit" (3:5). Letting the Spirit lead, they may end up in a different place entirely—neither worshipping in Jerusalem, nor Gerizim, as in a true dialogue, neither one will convert the other to their way, but something new will be born, where their understanding of God, themselves, and "the other" will have changed, which then means their manner of worship will also change.

This part of the dialogue between Jesus and the woman ends with them sharing their hopes for the messianic times. It is in speaking together their hopes for their people, for their children and grandchildren, that they can experience God's revelation in their midst. There's a famous story that Jimmy Carter tells how on the final day of his attempts to try to get Menachem Begin and Anwar Sadat to reach a peace accord at camp David in 1978. The talks were breaking down and each was retreating to his own space. Carter was shuttling back and forth, trying to bring them together. When he finally got them to sit down again in the same room, he asked them to show him photos of their children and grandchildren. Each man did so and spoke with pride and longing of his hopes and dreams for a future of peace for the little ones of the next generations. This was the moment of breakthrough for the talks to proceed to an accord.

As Jesus and the woman spoke of their hopes and dreams, together they wove a vision by which God could be perceived as fully manifest in their midst. Transcending the names each of them used for God and God's Anointed, they could both experience the presence of the divine as "I AM," the way Moses, their common ancestor, expressed what he had experienced of God on

Sinai.

For Reflection:

Who will speak a word that will rouse them?

How do we speak to one another across boundaries of difference about what is most dear to us:
how we call God, how we worship, and what are our eschatological dreams?

IV. Astonishment at Talking with a Woman

As the dialogue between Jesus and the woman concludes, Jesus' disciples return and they are astonished that he is talking with a woman. It is notable that the evangelist does not say they were astonished that he was talking with a Samaritan. The issue is that she is a woman. But they don't have the courage to ask him why he was talking with her or what he wanted from her. If this vignette does not elaborate for the disciples what Jesus got from the woman, the rest of the Gospel does make it abundantly clear that Jesus' female followers told the story of Jesus quite differently in their circles, and that has, or could have, a profound influence on our understanding of God, Christ, the Spirit, ourselves and our cosmos.

If we widen our lenses beyond the story of the Samaritan woman and Jesus, we see that this is one part of a much bigger theme that ties together the whole of the Fourth Gospel. It is the theme of new life that is born out of death, and it is cast in female terminology and imagery. Throughout the gospel birthing language and the symbols of water and blood, the two liquids that accompany the birthing process, weave a theology of the life and death of Jesus quite different from that of other New Testament books. In this gospel, Jesus' death is not an atonement for human sin, but rather a birth to new life. When a soldier pierces the side of Jesus, from which blood and water flow, we are given a powerful image of Jesus' death as a portal to new life.

The theme begins in the very first verses of the Prologue. John 1:3 says of the *Logos* (Word), "all things came into being through him." The verb *ginomai*, here translated "came into being" actually means "to be born." A more literal rendering of John 1:3 is "all things *were birthed* through him." Then, in vv. 12-13 of the Prologue, we find, "But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God." The verb *genna* $\epsilon\tau$, "were born" in v. 13 usually refers to female birthing, rather than male begetting. What John 1:13 emphasizes is that the birthing of God's children comes about through divine action, and contrasts with human procreation, which originates in human desire ("will of the flesh"), more precisely, male desire ("the will of man").¹ "Not of blood" likely refers to the belief in antiquity that conception occurred through the mingling of woman's blood with male seed.

The Prologue sets the stage for an understanding of discipleship that entails acceptance of one's birth as a child of God, and empowerment to engender life in others through faith in the

¹The Greek word in John 1:13 is *andros*, which refers specifically to males, unlike *anthr* $\epsilon\tau$ *pos*, which connotes both women and men. "The will of man" refers to the notion in antiquity that the male was the primary agent in human procreation. Sexual activity was by his initiative and woman was thought to be only the vessel for the embryo.

Logos. There is an intriguing blurring of gender boundaries: the male *Logos* (“Word”) births all things (1:3) and *Theos* (“God”) births the children of God (1:12-13). Not only that, but in the final verse of the Prologue the Son is at the breast (*eis ton kolpon*) of the Father (1:18). This same phrase reappears in John 13:23, where, at the Last Supper, the Beloved Disciple is reclining *en tē kolpē tou Iēsou*, “in the bosom of Jesus.”² The intimacy between God and Jesus and between Jesus and the Beloved Disciple is like that of a nursing mother with her child at her breast.

Looking next at chapter 2, the symbol of water comes to the fore in the scene of the wedding feast at Cana. This episode is the inauguration of Jesus’ public ministry and culminates with his disciples beginning to believe in him (2:11). Critical to the account is that it is the mother of Jesus who initiates the whole process. It is she who recognizes “the hour” for the birthing of his public ministry (2:3). Jesus, however, initially responds, “My hour has not yet come” (2:4). Throughout the Fourth Gospel, the “hour” primarily refers to the hour of Jesus’ return to the Father, accomplished in his passion, death, resurrection, ascension, and glorification. Thus, at 12:23, shortly after the chief priests and Pharisees have resolved to arrest Jesus (11:57), Jesus announces “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.” In the farewell discourse to his disciples, Jesus interprets his “hour” in terms of birthing. He likens his coming passion to the pains of a woman in labor, and assures his followers of the ensuing joy at the new birth (16:20-22). We’ll return to that text in a minute.

The Cana scene is intimately tied to the crucifixion of Jesus by the figure of Jesus’ mother. These two scenes, unique to the Fourth Gospel, are the only two in which the mother of Jesus is present. They serve as bookends, bracketing the whole story of Jesus’ earthly mission. The one who gave Jesus physical birth draws him forth in the Cana episode, assisting in the birth of his public mission, and in the crucifixion scene, she witnesses the completion of his earthly life and ministry, and is midwife to the birth of the next phase to be carried on by his disciples.

Moving to chapter 3, the theme of birthing is quite explicit in Jesus’ conversation with Nicodemus, where the verb *gennaō*, “to be born,” occurs seven times. Jesus says to Nicodemus, “No one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above” (3:3). Nicodemus is puzzled, “How can one be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?” (3:4). Jesus explains, “Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and the Spirit. . . Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘you must be born from above’” (3:5, 7). There is a play on words as *anōthen* denotes both “again” and “from above.” While Nicodemus understands Jesus to say “born again,” Jesus explains that being born “from above” means birth in water and the Spirit.

It is in the crucifixion scene that the meaning of birth in water and Spirit comes clearer. At Jesus’ death, he hands over the Spirit (19:30). This is juxtaposed with flowing water from the pierced side of Jesus (19:34). Just as in Ezekiel 36:25-27, where the prophet proclaims, “I will sprinkle clean water upon you . . . and a new spirit I will put within you,” the symbols of water and spirit signal a rebirth accomplished by divine action.

We can see now how the episode of Jesus’ encounter with the woman of Samaria (4:4-42) advances the theme of birthing, with the symbol of water. There is one other aspect of Jesus’

²The *NRSV* and *NAB* mask the connection with 1:18 when they translate 13:23: “was reclining next to him” and “was reclining at Jesus’ side.”

offer of “living water” (4:10), that is important to the theme of birthing. When Jesus says “The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life” (4:14), a connection can be heard with the Hebrew Scriptures, where “living water” or “flowing water” occurs several times, and it often has sexual overtones. In the Song of Songs, for example, the lover says: “a garden locked is my sister, my bride, a garden locked, a fountain sealed . . . a garden fountain, a well of living water, and flowing streams from Lebanon” (4:12, 15). Similarly, the author of Proverbs advises that a man should take pleasure in his own wife, saying, “Drink water from your own cistern, flowing water from your own well” (5:15). In addition, Old Testament writers and others of the period used “water” to refer to “the processes of human reproduction and particularly to the actual coming forth from the womb after the breaking of the mother’s water.”

The meaning of “living water” is further developed in the scene during the Feast of Dedication, when Jesus cries out, “Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink. As the Scripture has said, ‘Out of the believer’s heart (*koilia*) shall flow rivers of living water.’ Now he said this about the Spirit, which believers in him were to receive; for as yet there was no Spirit, because Jesus was not yet glorified” (7:37-39). In v. 38 the word *koilia*, often translated in this passage as “heart,”³ is actually the word for “womb, uterus,” once again evoking a birthing image, and pointing ahead to the water that flows from the pierced side of Jesus in 19:34.

One other thing to notice is that there is ambiguity in 7:38 with regard to the referent of the possessive pronoun. Is it the womb of Jesus or that of the believer from which the rivers of living water flow? The expression *koilias autou*, “his womb,” could refer to either the believer or Jesus. When read in light of 19:34, both referents can be understood to be in view. The life-giving mission birthed by Jesus is carried forward by believers, both female and male, who are not mere receptacles for living water, but are themselves conduits of it.

The use of the metaphor of birthing is nowhere more explicit than in the Farewell Discourse where Jesus speaks to his disciples about his impending passion, “Very truly, I tell you, you will weep and mourn, but the world will rejoice; you will have pain, but your pain will turn into joy. When a woman is in labor, she has pain, because her hour has come. But when her child is born, she no longer remembers the anguish because of the joy of having brought a human being into the world. So you have pain now; but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one can take your joy from you” (16:20-22). With these verses, the Johannine author portrays Jesus’ travail in parallel terms to the divine anguish in bringing forth the renewed Israel. Isaiah, voices God’s struggle to rebirth Israel after the exile thus: “For a long time I have held my peace, I have kept still and restrained myself; now I will cry out like a woman in labor, I will gasp and pant” (Isa 42:14). Israel’s own anguish over the longed-for peace and restoration is expressed similarly: “Like a woman with child, who writhes and cries out in her pangs when she is near her time, so were we because of you, O LORD; we were with child, we writhed, but we gave birth only to wind. We have won no victories on earth, and no one is born to inhabit the world.” (Isa 26:17-18). This lament over the failure to give birth is followed with an assurance

³It is rendered “from the believer’s heart.” (*NRSV*), “from his heart” (*NJB*), “from within.” (*NAB*), “out of his belly” (*KJV*).

of hope in the ensuing verse: “Your dead shall live, their corpses shall rise. O dwellers in the dust, awake and sing for joy!” (Isa 26:19). Isaiah 66:7-8 assures speediness and effortlessness in Zion’s birthing of a renewed people, “Before she was in labor she gave birth; before her pain came upon her she delivered a son. Who has heard of such a thing? Who has seen such things? Shall a land be born in one day? Shall a nation be delivered in one moment? Yet as soon as Zion was in labor she delivered her children.”

There are other places in the Hebrew Scriptures where God is portrayed as a birthing mother. In his farewell before his death, Moses combines two powerful images as he admonishes the Israelites to be faithful: “You were unmindful of the Rock that bore you; you forgot the God who gave you birth” (Deut 32:18). In another text, the Psalmist acclaim: “You are my son; today I have begotten (LXX *genna* $\text{\textcircled{E}}$, given birth to) you” (Ps 2:7). In speaking of the divine work in creation, Job offers both images of a begetting father and a birthing mother: “Has the rain a father, or who has begotten the drops of dew? From whose womb did the ice come forth, and who has given birth to the hoarfrost of heaven?” (Job 38:28-29). In one instance Isaiah juxtaposes images of God as both nursing mother and birth mother: “Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you” (49:15). Isaiah also portrays God as a comforting mother: “you shall nurse and be carried on her arm, and dandled on her knees. As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you; you shall be comforted in Jerusalem” (Isa 66:12-13).

The Fourth Evangelist builds on this rich biblical tradition of speaking of the divine in terms of a birthing mother. Notably, in the Hebrew Scriptures, the images of God as birthing occur in two of the most crucial and painful times in Israel’s history: the slavery in Egypt and the exile in Babylon. The Fourth Evangelist employs this same metaphor so that the crucifixion of Jesus can be understood as a similar experience of death that God will use to open the way for new life.

The theme of birthing, so carefully woven throughout the Fourth Gospel, climaxes in the crucifixion scene, where, following Jesus’ death, “one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once blood and water came out” (19:34). The birthing of a renewed people of God is symbolized by the breaking of the amniotic fluid, accompanied by uterine blood. The “power to become children of God” that was assured in the Prologue (1:12) is accomplished. The mother of Jesus, who gave him physical birth and who mediated the birth of his public ministry (2:1-11), is present again (19:25), as witness of the fulfillment of his earthly life and mission, and as midwife to the rebirth of the people who will continue his mission. Nicodemus, who struggled to understand what “born again/from above” could mean in 3:1-21, returns with Joseph of Arimathea, with a hundred pounds of myrrh and aloe with which to embalm Jesus’ body (19:39). As they wrap Jesus’ body with the spices in linen cloths (19:40), images of death and birth meld. They swaddle him with bands of cloth, as with a newborn (Luke 2:7). The presence of Nicodemus also recalls Jesus’ words to him about being born by water and the Spirit (3:5), which is now accomplished. Jesus’ offer of “living water” (4:10) and his promise that from his womb and that of the believer would flow “rivers of living water” (7:38), is brought to fulfillment as he hands over the spirit (19:30). Jesus’ final declaration, “It is finished” (19:30) can be heard as the declaration of a mother who cries out in joy when the birthpangs are over and her child is born.

One final image associated with birth is found in the resurrection appearance scene in

which the disciples' grief turns to joy (20:19-23). After a two-fold blessing of peace, and after entrusting his mission to the disciples, Jesus then breathes on them and says, "Receive the holy Spirit" (20:22). Just as a midwife may blow breath into the nostrils of a newborn to help it to breathe on its own, so Jesus breathes the breath of the Spirit upon the rebirthed community. There is an echo of the action of the Creator, who birthed the first human creature by breathing into its nostrils "the breath of life" and it became a "living being" (Gen 2:7). Ezekiel also used this image in prophesying the rebirth of Israel, as he proclaimed over the valley of dry bones, "I will cause breath to enter you and you shall live" (Ezek 37:5).

We began this reflection on the theme of birthing in the Fourth Gospel, by noting that Jesus engaged in deep theological discussion with a woman, while his disciples didn't even want to ask about it. What might be the kind of prophetic dialogue needed between women and men in the church today? What might be the effects of embracing more widely in the church female language and symbols in talking about the divine? How might the ways in which the women articulate the good news be "a word that will rouse them"?

I want to suggest some ways in which speaking of Jesus' death as a birth to new life, rather than as an atonement for sin is not simply a theological exercise, but has profound pastoral consequences. Recently a number of theologians have begun to re-examine the effects of atonement theologies, noting the ways in which they can foment violence and victimization. Dangerous images of an offended God who needs to be appeased or paid off for human sinfulness have had frightening consequences, especially in the lives of women who are abused. Countless women think of themselves as deserving of punishment for their sinfulness and they submit mutely to violence directed at them. Many make meaning of their suffering by understanding it as the way to "take up their cross" and follow Jesus. Metaphors of ransom, scapegoat, or silent suffering servant likewise pose problematic images of a divine Father who sends his son to be tortured and executed in exchange for human liberation. Such formulations obscure the gratuitous love of God, placing sin and guilt center stage. In addition, they promote meek compliance in persons oppressed by violence and systems of injustice, rather than stir them to action to do what they can to confront and dismantle these systems.

One story that illustrates the effects of such a change in theological understanding. I had the privilege of visiting several times the diocese of San Cristóbal de las Casas, in Chiapas, México, where Don Samuel Ruiz had been bishop for 40 years. He was a man with a great pastoral heart and he talks freely about how the indigenous people (who make up about 80% of the diocese) converted him. One of his concerns early on in his years as bishop, was to help give voice to the women. He had noticed that in every gathering the women kept their eyes downcast and never spoke, even when invited to. With the help of women religious, they finally came upon a way to help empower the women. They began grassroots bible study groups for women, and began to learn to read the Scriptures "with the mind, eyes, and heart of a woman." They began to question, "if Mary Magdalene was able to leave her home to go and preach the gospel with Jesus, then we should be able to go to bible study groups and help evangelize in our diocese," and so on. One day one of the women returned home from attending a bible study session, and found her husband drunk and enraged that she was not there to serve his coffee when he wanted it. He beat her very badly, as he had many other times. The next morning, when her friends saw her battered face and her bruised body, they decided that it was time for

them to “lay down their life for their friend,” as they had been reading in the Gospel of John. They had moved from a theology of accepting every kind of suffering as a silent, suffering servant, and had begun to understand the suffering caused by abuse or injustice should be stopped if possible, just as Jesus had done. They had come to understand that “taking up their cross,” referred to the choice to expose themselves to the negative consequences of being a disciple of Jesus. For them, that could be the expense and difficulty of getting to the bible study groups, or it could mean exposing themselves to gossip and criticism for doing what was not traditionally a woman’s role in their culture. Having begun to theologize in this way, the women of the village in Chiapas gathered *en masse* and went to the home of the batterer and confronted him. They threatened that if he ever struck his wife again, it would be he that would have the battered face and the bruised body. This is one of those “happily ever after” stories, where the man was so taken aback by the confrontation, that he did receive the help he needed to stop drinking and stop battering his wife.

Another important contribution that the birth metaphor offers is that it opens the way for female disciples to identify more fully with Christ, the Creator, and the Spirit. Gender boundaries are blurred and transcended in the images presented in the Fourth Gospel of the person of Jesus, who gives birth to a renewed people, of God who births believers (1:13), and of the Spirit, through whom believers are born again/from above (3:5). As all three members of the Trinity are spoken of in birthing terms, a helpful insight is that it is not one single member that is the “female face” of God; the whole of the divine being and divine activity is expressed in female form and action. Taking this to heart can lead to a transformed reality. Guatemalan Nobel prize-winner Julia Esquivel articulates what will be the effect when women and men are both equally recognized as the image and likeness of God: there will be “equality in difference, flourishing in a creative, fruitful harmony, in the couple and in the relationships of all peoples and societies.”⁴

In addition, the metaphor of birthing gives dignity to the bodily experience of women and sees it as a locus for the holy.⁵ This image helps break down the dualism between what is bodily and what is spiritual, helping believers to encounter God in all aspects of life. It feeds an incarnational faith that rejoices in the Word having become flesh (1:14) and that finds the divine in what is bodily, not in spite of it.

Such female imagery of God also opens up new possibilities for women who have survived incest or sexual abuse. For many such survivors, relating to a male image of God is impossible. Finally, the birthing metaphor gives value to suffering, as part of a natural process, but not as deserved or desirable. Suffering is seen as the consequence of a choice to entrust oneself to love. This metaphor enables us to understand Jesus’ self-gift as similar to that of lovers who choose to make painful sacrifices out of love for the other, able to be endured because of that love, and because of the new life that will result. Unlike the kinds of economic

⁴Julia Esquivel, “Conquered and Violated Women,” in *The Power of Naming. A Concilium Reader in Feminist Liberation Theology* (ed. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza; Concilium; Maryknoll: Orbis, 1996), 105-14, here 113.

⁵For a more extensive exploration of this theme and of the image of all creation coming from the womb of God, see Sallie McFague, *Body of God. An Ecological Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993).

transactions between God and humanity that are implied in sacrificial and ransom metaphors, the birthing image evokes an exchange of love that is mutual and self-replicating.

For Reflection:

Who will speak a word that will rouse them?

What might be the kind of prophetic dialogue needed between women and men in the church today?

What might be the effects of embracing more widely in the church female language and symbols in talking about the divine?

How might the ways in which the women articulate the good news be “a word that will rouse them”?

V. Fields Ripe for Harvesting

Returning to the story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman, we find Jesus talking with his disciples about food and nourishment and reaping and harvesting. Jesus says his food is to do the will of the One who sent him. In other places in the gospel, he speaks explicitly about what he understands God’s will to be. He says in 10:10, “I came that they may have life and have it abundantly;” at 12:32, his mission is “to draw all people to myself;” and his final prayer is “that all may be one,” in the abiding love of the Triune God (17:22-23). Jesus tries, through this discussion about his mission, to get his disciples to understand and join him in the work of overcoming boundaries of difference so that “all may be one.”

The imagery of sowing and harvesting are often used in the New Testament to speak of the Christian mission. Today these images also call to mind the importance of Earth and our connection to it. Not only is prophetic dialogue needed with persons who are different or who hold different beliefs, but also with created beings that are not human. In a prophetic dialogue that includes the whole interconnected web of life in all its fragility and strength, we listen to what Earth has to tell us and we open ourselves to conversion regarding the use and treatment of nonhuman creatures and Earth itself.

For Reflection:

Who will speak a word that will rouse them?

Who will speak for Earth and all its creatures?

How will I hear their cries?

How will I respond now to the eschatological hope that all may be one?

VI. Harmonious Oneness

The story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman ends with Jesus bringing his disciples into the dialogue, and the Samaritan woman successfully doing the same with her townspeople. The circle of harmonious oneness is widening, rippling outward, as each dialogue partner reaches out to bring in others, and as they agree to abide with one another. They have had to take risks, revealing themselves in trust to one another. They have had to learn different languages, different ways of communicating, different understandings of God. They have had to consider new styles and places of worship. There is a dying to self in this process, as something new is

born. But the death is worth it when what they experience is rivers of living water flowing from within them. Parched and desolate places of animosity and hatred are irrigated with waters of love and healing. Each who experiences this cannot keep it to themselves, but must help bring others to this place of vibrant greenness, irrigated by the life-giving water and blood of the One who endlessly births hope afresh.

For Reflection:

Who will speak a word that will rouse them?

Can you? Must you? Will you?

What word spoke most deeply to you?

How will you respond?