

# **EMBODIED**

## **CLERGY WOMEN AND THE SOLIDARITY OF A MOTHERING GOD**

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## CHAPTER 1



# The Wait

**Never in my life have I waited more** than I do on these children. Even to become a parent, the waiting was excruciating. My spouse and I waited through missteps and heart-wrenching decisions for our adoption placement, then for months to be able to have our daughter in our arms. Our older daughter was herself in the category of “waiting children,” waiting to leave the children’s home in Eastern Europe where she had lived all of her two years up until that point. We were all waiting for things none of us knew, like how becoming a family can help us all to heal and thrive, but also rip our hearts wide open and strain every relationship because the losses out of which our family emerged will never go away. We waited to bond solidly with our first child before we tried to conceive a younger sibling. While our second child grew in my uterus, my mother stayed with us for a month because the doctor thought I would deliver early (although I ended up going five days past the due date) asking frequently, “Well, do you feel anything? Wouldn’t today be a good day to go into labor?” And our congregation waited with us. Well, sort of.

The congregation I served as pastor during both our adoption and pregnancy was in on our news, but only once it was relatively certain. They did not know all of our struggles in the process, on purpose. They did not know that the referral call with our first daughter’s profile came while our congregation hosted a conference for ALLIA, All Liberian Lutherans In the Americas. They did not know I was hiding nausea and extreme fatigue during the first trimester of pregnancy. Even when I did share our reasons and

decisions related to becoming parents, congregation members listened and interpreted them according to their own biases.

Our church was supportive, as best they knew how. They love children, and it was so touching the way that the other children enveloped our toddler with hands to hold and buddies to sit with as soon as she came home to our family. But during the Wait, comments like “It will all happen in God’s time” made me cringe and hear anew how unhelpful such platitudes are for those waiting to become parents. My anxiety over wanting her with us immediately was exacerbated by my physician husband framing his own frustration through developmental milestones: “Between ages two and three are crucial months for brain development. We have to get her here and connected with resources ASAP!” Yet I knew that many West African members of our congregation had left children behind with extended family for years, since their visas only included certain family members. Month- or year-long separations were the norm for them. Was my “wait” so much more heart-breaking than theirs?

Demonstrating fertility and birthing children are so valued in that same immigrant community that adoption as my husband and I were pursuing it was a strange concept to our church members from West Africa. I overheard well-meaning church people talking about me, honestly wondering why we would adopt “someone else’s child” unless I could not birth one of my own. There were cultural assumptions in there for sure, but that bias is also pretty common among white Americans. Even the judge in Eastern Europe questioned us on this during our court proceedings to adopt. Back home, the congregation waited with us, but only in part as I was too emotionally exhausted to sort out any misconceptions with them.

Most congregants feel they know the pastor, but much of the time, congregations only see what priests and pastors choose to show them. The pre-parenting stage is one of those times when

women clergy especially will choose to be circumspect. The uncertainty of adoption added more layers in my case. I appreciated people wanting to celebrate with us but felt like that was only half of the story. Any adoption is preceded by a profound loss for the child and brings unknown challenges ahead for the entire family. Some adoptive parents are also grieving their own fertility struggles. There is a deep tangle of emotions behind our news of becoming parents. Keeping our adoption process quiet until it was certain was also a practical decision for me. If people are too empathetic or kind to me, I start tearing up. I could function better in my work, instead of dissolving into a puddle, if nobody knew the fears and desperate hopes occupying my mind most of the time.

During the wait for our second child, as I became visibly pregnant, our older daughter developed some new attachment issues. Viktoria was two-and-a-half years old when she joined our family through adoption and had never shown any separation anxiety when attending preschool or other group activities. She had cheerfully waved goodbye and gone back to playing. But now, at almost four, our Vikta had to be carried out of the sanctuary sobbing if she could not be near me. It is very challenging to deliver the words of institution or distribute communion with a child attached to one's leg. I would try to lead her to the back of the sanctuary during the sharing of the peace, so my husband could quickly get her out the door before she became distinctly not peaceful as the liturgy continued. The wait for her younger sister changed how we all felt about and approached our family participating in church. If there was a reason I could think of—a meeting after worship, or confirmation classes all afternoon—we would all breathe a sigh of relief that my husband and daughter should stay at home instead of commuting across town with me for the unpredictable ordeal. Congregation members asked about our daughter and missed seeing her, but I could not function as a pastor otherwise. Had I been more confident in blending my

mom and pastor identities, or in the congregation's ability to embrace or support those two fully on display together, I might have handled that phase differently. Maybe I would have seen the opportunity to preach about God as mother and embody it. But at the time I was simply attempting to survive the painful phase. In her limited vocabulary for many months afterward, even once I was officially "on leave from call" and we were worshiping at a new church, Vikta summarized: "Me cry old church. Wanna be with Mama whole time." I remember, baby, and it was almost more than I could stand.

Becoming a mother told every other mother how vulnerable I had become. My heart is walking around in the world with my children and I would do anything for the love of them. Mothers can embody the meaning of "to lay down one's life" for another (John 15:13). That makes me incredibly vulnerable. I never put into words publicly how much the process of becoming Viktoria's mother pulled apart my heart or hers and put them back together again in a new formation, but other mothers can guess. The closest question people asked about my transformation was, "How are you adjusting?" to which my answer had to be, "immediately."

Just as congregations have a limited perspective on the pastor's family planning, Christians have little to go on when we wonder about God's motivations for relating to us as a parent. We only see now as if in a mirror dimly, as 1 Corinthians 13 puts it, and admittedly through our own biases. Why did God want to nurture children in God's own image? Do any parent's intentions end up matching reality anyway? Christians can speculate among ourselves, but we only have God's actions described in Genesis or the Gospels, not the emotional backstory. Why—in our creation stories—does God choose to parent older human beings first (Adam and Eve), instead of making newborns, who are so much more easily influenced and molded? Why does God choose to "adopt" Abraham, then create Jesus by birth?

Waiting seems to be key to becoming parents and prepares us for this identity. What if planting the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in the midst of the garden was not designed to test Adam and Eve's faithfulness? What if it was done so that God could wait, then mother the two through their mistakes? God and human beings could thereby become family. The children's defiance can be assumed in the plot of humankind (we know what we are like). But through presenting a choice, in the form of a tree bearing tantalizing fruit, the creator-creature relationship turned into a parent-child relationship. This relationship is even more fundamental to our identity and faith than the original sin. The pattern of every biblical story from then on becomes thus: we think we know better, but God will never stop loving us through every failure. God will be there, as a mother who cannot let us suffer without experiencing great agony herself, to pick up our pieces. God waited for her children to act independently, giving them the means to make the choice, but preparing them to make the right one. If we are going to see the time in Eden as any kind of test, perhaps it is one of God, mothering for the first time. God becomes a mother when she has to abandon parenting by decree and adjust to loving children through the consequences of their defiant actions. God no longer operates on the premise "Let there be . . . and it was so" because loving parents know that is never the end of the story.

What is a mothering God's first step following the admission of Adam and Eve's guilt? She makes them clothes herself. God knows the human beings are ashamed; that is the natural consequence of having their eyes opened to what they have done. Yet God does not dismiss their actions. There are consequences, and God will let them live with them. God takes her time and demonstrates loving care to meet their new needs, created by their defiance. The act of sewing clothes for Adam and Eve is what mothers do. We make a way for our children to move forward, even when they do not



deserve it, creating an opportunity to learn to recover from their failures, not simply to follow directions blindly. This loving nurture is even more potent when done with our own hands (sewing those clothes ourselves). I would stitch these words onto my children if I could: "I forgive you. You are not to be ashamed. You are my child." From this point forward, God's entire story contained in the Bible is defined by interaction with her children. In the visions of Revelation, the martyrs are again clothed by God, in robes washed in the blood of the Lamb. It is all consuming, being a mother; it takes over the narrative about who we are and what we are about in the world. Although we certainly make our own impact on the world, now so do these others, nurtured in our image. All that waiting to become a mother was really waiting to give up control.

The creation stories in Genesis identify all of humankind as God's children, made in God's image. Yet a specific, intimate relationship that mirrors mother and child is quite different from God's general love for all people. For this, God waits. The pattern of God reaching out to chosen people in the ancestor stories of Genesis is like a series of adoption processes, only made official when the children live into the relationship, responding in trust. There is trauma too, as each of them loses connections with their birth families and former lives when they follow God into the future. Noah, Abraham and Sarah, Jacob, and eventually, Moses are each children whom God chooses, and who respond by allowing the relationship to define who they are. It takes a lot of waiting to get there. Were there false starts to God's parent-child relationships that we do *not* read about in the Old Testament? Did God just have to decide to move forward although the fit was questionable? Parents might love as unconditionally as possible. But the slow growth of mutual attachment strengthens us into the mothers we want to be.

Before reading Kelley Nikondeha's *Adopted: A Sacrament of Belonging in a Fractured World*, I had never considered how the

relationship formed between Abraham and God resembles an adoption. Now I cannot see it any other way. The waiting is part of this story too, in multiple ways. God waits as Abraham uproots his family from the land of his ancestors and heads off at God's instruction. When God promises to make of him a great nation, he and his elderly wife Sarah scheme to conceive a child through Sarah's handmaid Hagar. Do not tell me this story makes the case that adoption does not last once a child-by-blood is in the picture, though. All it proves to me is that even the most revered patriarch and matriarch of our religious lineage messed up when it came to setting life-giving adoption boundaries and relationships.

The grievous power dynamics and lack of boundaries would make anyone involved with foster care or adoption shudder. Abraham and Sarah used their power over their servant Hagar to make her conceive a child with Abraham who would be "birthed on Sarah's knee," and therefore a legitimate heir. Genesis recounts that Sarah became deeply jealous of both the birth mother Hagar and child Ishmael once she had birthed Isaac, but I wonder if she had ever bonded with "her" child Ishmael, or always kept him at arm's length. Ishmael represented Sarah's own inability to conceive not just for her many years of marriage, but specifically as she saw her part in bringing God's promises to fruition. Sarah did not try to be the adoptive parent, as far as we can tell. Sarah is not the parent I have my eye on in this situation, anyway.

There is so much heartbreak in this story of who is to mother the promised child that we almost get distracted from the mothering activities God is doing: waiting while children attempt their own solutions, reminding them of promises and assuring them of God's ability to deliver on those promises. Our mothering God turns the heartache Abraham and Sarah have caused toward a new future. God claims and makes promises to the child Ishmael at Abraham's pleading. "As for Ishmael, I have heard you; I will bless him and make him fruitful and exceedingly numerous; he shall be

the father of twelve princes, and I will make him a great nation. But my covenant I will establish with Isaac, whom Sarah shall bear to you at this season next year” (Gen. 17:20–21). Once Isaac is old enough to play with his half-brother Ishmael, the sight of them together stirs up the old resentment in Sarah. She wants Hagar and Ishmael gone, and God seems to realize that there is no repairing this complicated family dynamic.

The matter was very distressing to Abraham on account of his son. But God said to Abraham, “Do not be distressed because of the boy and because of your slave woman; whatever Sarah says to you, do as she tells you, for it is through Isaac that offspring shall be named for you. As for the son of the slave woman, I will make a nation of him also, because he is your offspring.”

Genesis 21:11–13

Sarah would not do the work, so God would have to make a new way for Ishmael and Hagar. The followers of Islam, who share Abrahamic ancestry with Jews and Christians, testify to the great nation God promised to create from Ishmael.

This next part of the family story is of primary interest to only one of those three branches of faith rooted in Abraham: the Christians to whom I belong. God bringing Jesus into the world as God’s own begotten child is the foundation of our faith. How long did God wait to become a parent by birth? Although many of God’s interactions with Abraham and other chosen leaders resemble parenting, the analogy has some holes. For example, the leaders live into their relationship with God during their own adulthood. God experiences parenthood in a different way with Jesus’s birth, a child who from the beginning knows he belongs to God. According to Matthew 1:7, “all the generations from Abraham to David are fourteen generations; and from David to the deportation to Babylon, fourteen generations; and from the deportation to Babylon to the Messiah, fourteen generations.” What must that bidding of

time have been like for God, waiting to form the intimate relationship of parent to a helpless, vulnerable child? Was God waiting for the right timing, when the “family” was stable, or at a crisis point? Or for the right earthly partner in Mary? Did God wait for all the resources to be lined up, for this child to survive and become all he needed to be for the sake of everyone else? For what do we wait in planning for children?

Christians take a kind of comfort in reading the prophetic books of the Hebrew Scriptures as “foretelling Jesus” yet since the prophets declared their messages to their own time and place, we are always reading anachronistically. Still there is something about this tendency: what happened long before sets the stage for this and every birth. Even things we never noticed, like how we were parented or who was included in our family circle, subtly influence the families we envision or create. Maybe potential parents think we are waiting on the right time, the right conditions, to have enough money or a settled home or the right partner to have children. At least half of pregnancies are unplanned but are still a product of our histories and choices, or in some cases the choices imposed upon us by society. When a pregnancy is the result of rape, misogyny and toxic masculinity overshadow women’s individual choices about having children. Living in such a society is still part of our story. Whether we planned it or not, this much is true: we did not get here alone, and we cannot move forward alone.

Jesus is a child of God in a different way than Adam and Eve, Abraham and Sarah, Moses or David. According to Christian theology, God depended on a human woman to bring the One fully of God’s own being and yet fully human into our world. For this, God needed Mary’s participation. How might we view this: God used a surrogate? Is God a previously arranged adoptive parent, foreshadowing with the announcement to Mary but making God’s parentage official at Jesus’s baptism in the Jordan River?

With Mary as Jesus's mother, then must we see God as Father (but—oops—Jesus has that in Joseph too)? Instead of attempting to definitively label the relationship, perhaps we can recognize that in waiting and depending on others to become a parent, God experiences as we do the necessity of letting go and trusting others, in order to take on this new role. Perhaps God had to acknowledge too: some of the characteristics the child gets from me will be problematic for them and some beautiful; the same will be true from my partner.

If we did not recognize the miraculous nature of women's bodies before, let this be the time. Women pastors and preachers are an embodied testimony to how much God trusts our bodies. God depends on a woman's body and waits on a woman's body to become a parent, the pinnacle of relationship with humankind. Not only do women's bodies expand and reshape to hold, nourish, protect, and bear humans into the world, but we believe that Mary's body bore the Divine. So much of our waiting on our bodies to conceive or carry to term can be fraught with worry or self-blame over genetics or behaviors. When an unplanned pregnancy brings risk and brutal hardships for the mother, we look for whom to blame. Does the claim that God entered our world and became an intimately invested parent through one such fragile yet powerful unplanned pregnancy change anything? That belief puts my own self-scrutiny to rest a bit because God trusted a woman's body to grow, deliver, and raise God's only begotten child, in a time when birth outcomes and survival to adulthood had frightening odds. God trusts and thanks Mary's bodily strength and resilience to birth and raise Jesus. How might our attitude toward women's bodies change, if we put this truth front and center? Women's bodies are miraculous, and are God's chosen means of entering our world!

## Fertility Struggles

In the first creation story, Genesis 1:26–28 reads,

Then God said, “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.” So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them: male and female he created them. God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.”

Procreation is necessary to a creation story, to explain how there got to be so many people from presumably two. God says, “Be fruitful and multiply,” and it sounds like a command for human beings to act upon. Yet God does not say, “. . . if I decide to bless you with fertility.” Our creation stories tell us who we are, establishing our identity in relation to the rest of creation and to God. There is nothing in there implying “procreation is the major indication of the quality of relationship between God and humankind” or “disregard caring for creation as long as you make babies.” In fact, “being fruitful” and “multiplying” are two different verbs, so in addition to making human beings, having lives that produce good fruit in the world carries just as much weight as the other verb. In any case, even if one is determined to take this creation story as historical, there is still no mention that God is going to be involved in conception or the lack thereof. Eve offers an interpretation with the naming of her first child, since the word for “produced” in Hebrew is similar to “Cain”: “I have produced a man with the help of the Lord” (Gen. 4:1b).

Language about God opening wombs or granting pregnancy becomes a convention in scriptural stories (Rachel, Hannah, Mary),

making a case that God has a hand in the trajectory of our lives. Sarah laughed when she heard she would birth a child. It is not written that she begged or bargained with God for a child, but God promised and then gave. The idea of praying hard enough to overcome fertility struggles may come from what we remember of Hannah's story. In 1 Samuel, chapters 1 & 2, Hannah is one of Elkanah's two wives, and is constantly taunted by the other, rival wife. Hannah wept because of how she was taunted, and picked fights with her husband, who thought he alone should be more than enough to make her happy. Then she made a vow to the Lord that if she would conceive a child, she would give him to the Lord's service. Hannah made an adoption plan, even before Samuel was conceived. This is a key story to show how God cleanses the priesthood that had become corrupt. What if Hannah's story is not about fertility but about adoption? If anything, Hannah teaches us how children are not "ours" in the first place.

I am convinced that fertility is not actually the point in many of these stories, nor are they preaching some kind of fertility gospel of pleasing God to get pregnant. The detail that "God opened her womb" seems to be included in some stories so the next thing could happen, but not necessarily to say that previously God was actively closing a woman's womb. I have heard from individuals who are not able to conceive that perhaps God does not want them to be parents, and I fear that a misunderstanding of these plot points in the Bible might be at fault. Yet we do not blame other situations that cause us grief on God, do we? For example, does anyone claim that God does not want them to be employed, so is keeping them from finding employment? Does God keep some of our blood pressure too high, give some rheumatoid arthritis or others early onset Alzheimer's? Wouldn't we be ashamed to blame any of those things on God? So why, then, does infertility or conception get pinned on God?

One day when our older child was four, my body stretched and contracted, until, with blood vessels popping all over my

face, I pushed our second child out into the world. The few times Scripture expresses a metaphor of birthing (most often in the prophetic book of Isaiah), the pain, effort, and power of a mother comes through. What I want to remember that God must know too, is that a mother should never have to muster that strength alone. She needs a partner, a midwife, her own mother, perhaps even a doctor trained in C-sections to help her find the strength to push her child out or to take over and get her child out. We need each other to birth new life. That, for me, was literally and metaphorically true. My maternity nurse Rose and my husband coached me through to the other side, past the utter absence of color that I saw behind my eyelids every time I clamped them shut to push, into living color once again. Knowing that my mother was at home caring for our older daughter, I entrusted myself to Rose's knowledge and experience and to my husband's firm grip. They stood by me and bolstered me through this most miraculous of actions. For women who must give birth via cesarean section, the help of others is the only way both mother and child survive.

Did the Holy Spirit get to midwife for Mary? Surely God did not instigate conception, then leave the birth to Mary alone. Several times in the Psalms God is described as acting like a midwife:

Yet it was you who took me from the womb; you kept me safe on my mother's breast. On you I was cast from my birth, and since my mother bore me you have been my God.

Psalm 22:9–10

Upon you I have leaned from my birth; it was you who took me from my mother's womb. My praise is continually of you.

Psalm 71:6

Would God not also be comforting and encouraging, pushing even (as the Holy Spirit often does), until mother and child are safely



resting on the outside? Or perhaps the Holy Spirit is more like a postpartum doula, who helps the new mother to adjust after the birth, address the physical changes, mitigate anxiety about the new role, and navigate all the uncertainty? The Spirit of God might be manifested in the hormone oxytocin that flows through a new mother's body with great purpose. It gets labor going in the first place. Then a newborn scrambling to breastfeed releases more oxytocin, which increases a mother's feelings of attachment. God knows we cannot muster it on our own, especially after a traumatic birth. Breastfeeding or skin-to-skin contact get credit for stimulating the release of oxytocin, but we could also think of that hormone release as God no longer holding her breath. The wait is over, the pushing is finished, and the breath of life releases in a forceful wind. Now the mothering begins.

A birth mother's powerful actions during labor and delivery can set a precedent for understanding the mother's role in general. This is some of the groundwork the Old Testament prophet Isaiah lays in comparing God to a woman in labor. Lauren Winner has a remarkable chapter on this little-used metaphor for God in her book *Wearing God: Clothing, Laughter, Fire, and Other Overlooked Ways of Meeting God*. As mothers grunt, pant, or moan during labor in order to endure and manage it (although it cannot really be controlled), God too births the new creation through hard breathing and fierce labor.

We hardly ever talk about any of these things in church, but what if we did? The more vulnerable leaders are, the more our words matter. How many mothers' lives might we connect with? How many who are not mothers might value mothers' lives and witness in a new way? A male colleague told me how he nearly broke down while preaching on the divorce text from Matthew 19, as he talked about his own divorce and struggling with that scripture. People told him it was the best he had ever preached. Several women clergy I know have developed special worship services for

those with fertility struggles, miscarriages and infant loss out of their own deep grief over such losses. If a clergy mother picks up her upset child during worship, every mother in the place knows what it is like to be so needed, and yet have to multitask for everyone's sake. What a gift that vulnerability is to others. So, I am working on seeing my overactive tear ducts as a blessing for ministry, to let myself share more vulnerably with others.

A dear friend of mine has written about her fertility struggles in *Still a Mother: Journeys through Perinatal Bereavement*, participated in podcasts, a documentary, and the creation of a stage play about the journey to become a mother. She has become a master gardener, tends her friendships well, is the best auntie to her nieces, and cares for a congregation as an Episcopal priest and marriage and family therapist. She puts her vulnerable self out there, so that others know they are not alone. She negotiates relationships from a position of authority and nurture all the time, mothering like God. This friend helps me to recognize those who mother without the formal or public acknowledgment of their actions. She debunks the word “infertile” for herself and many others who have not been able to birth children but are certainly leading fertile lives in a myriad of ways.

Being childless by choice can be a faithful way to live as well. Several friends who are teachers have chosen not to become parents because the nurturing of young lives they do for the better part of most of their days is clearly enough. A friend who is a woman of color has mentored into adulthood so many undergraduate students that they would need the auditorium at the predominantly white college where she was a vice president in order to fit all of her “children” into one room. A third friend welcomed into her home two young men whose parents passed away; their relationships were already established through the church's youth ministries, but she took their relationship much deeper. They call her Mom and visiting her is “coming home.” Each of

these loving people mothers with a constancy that reflects God's consistent care for us.

Before Jesus was born into the world, God's mothering identity was a metaphor we would not likely notice in scripture very often. We do not have to stretch it to make it fit every part of the Bible; all analogies break down at some point. "Lord" was the more common way of addressing with respect the all-powerful God in the Hebrew Scriptures. In those fourteen generations of waiting between Abraham and Jesus, God is not often described in ways that resemble a mother or father. In fact, at some points God tries methods of discipline that I shudder to think of a parent using with children they love. Sometimes we are not mothering either. We are doing good work that needs to be done for future generations even if they will not be "our" children.

If we check the verbs—of our actions and God's—we might just be parenting without the title. God heard their cries, instructed, lamented, grieved, cried out, warned, and disciplined her children in between redeeming them from slavery in Egypt and sending them into exile in Babylon. She yearned for them to listen and to turn back to her. These may not be the actions mothers are most proud of, but they can certainly be used to describe some of our activities. When the identity of parent is breaking down for God or for us, perhaps we are in a waiting period, when that deeply invested, caregiving identity is not primary but it is certainly not gone, just like for our friends who are not recognized as parents, yet are behaving in parental ways. To name that waiting and the variety of parental actions will allow many people to know that they are seen by their faith community and by God. For clergy women to give ourselves permission to speak honestly about the Wait can be a gift for open, mutual pastoral relationships.

## **QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION**

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### **Clergy Women:**

1. Which words or actions of others were most helpful to you, during periods of waiting for children?
2. How do you understand the Wait to become a mother to have affected your spiritual life or relationship with your congregation?

### **Support Network:**

1. What has been your understanding of God's involvement in pregnancy or adoption? Have any of those ideas changed through reading this chapter?
2. Which of the ways God "became a parent" named in this chapter surprised you to think of it that way? Why?
3. Does it shift any of your expectations of God or your pastor, to acknowledge the pressures of the Wait?