

Series: Transition

September 3, 2017

Title: A New Path

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Text: Isaiah 42:14-17

Labor and Delivery

First Journey:

It's a journey of hours and inches. It began some nine months after conception. During those nine months the embryo that was you became an unborn child. Then one day your cozy little water-world was turned upside down and inside out.

Your journey began with contractions that came some minutes apart. But as labor progressed, the contractions came harder and faster. Each one moved you along until you were tightly wedged into the birth canal – that impossibly narrow passage from which you would enter a whole new world.

And what about mom's journey? For her the long wait was over: the moment of birth was at hand. The next hours would be consumed by the birthing process. Each breath held the power to help her stay focused, while continuing to provide both you and her with plenty of oxygen.

Some of those breaths were long and slow. Some were light and fast. Some were deep breaths that she held for several seconds before exhaling. She found a way.

Hour by hour, minute by minute, inch by inch, the journey progressed until the doctor held you in her hands.

Israel's rebirth:

Speaking to a confused and despondent Israel, God says something utterly startling:

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Isaiah 42:14 NIV

"For a long time I have been silent, I have been quiet and held myself back.

"But now, like a woman in childbirth, I cry out, I gasp and pant."

The long time of divine silence was certainly a mystery for Israel in exile. They wondered if God had given up on them. These words, written to them while still in pagan Babylon, explain that their decades of exile and humiliation were not the end of the journey. They were a time of incubation in which God was doing nothing less than growing a new people for a new time.

And now God announces that labor has begun: "Like a woman in childbirth, I cry out, I gasp and pant." It's time to head to the hospital. No more delays, no more waiting. The baby is on the way! Israel is to get ready to be reborn.

The divine pregnancy:

But did you know that you are part of another birthing journey? God Himself is pregnant with the new person that you are meant to be!

God pregnant? The LORD giving birth? It's all too easy to think of God as some distant being who created the world, and now sits back to see how it will turn out. But this is a radically different picture of God. Like an expectant mom, God has been pregnant with something new and wonderful. During that time of incubation, He may have seemed silent and disengaged. But don't be fooled. The birth journey is just around the corner.

And now, God announces that labor has begun: "Like a woman in childbirth, I cry out, I gasp and pant." He is not just observing the process. He is in the middle of it. God Himself experiences the contractions of spiritual labor and delivery! The great Creator is creating once again.

Transformation

The first breath:

Within 10 seconds after birth, a baby takes her first breath. Up until then, the baby's lungs have been filled with fluid and are uninflated. But with that first breath everything changes:

- That first breath brings oxygen into the baby's lungs, causing a decrease in blood flow resistance.
- The baby's circulatory system reconfigures to pump blood to and from the lungs.

- The lungs inflate and begin their lifelong work of bringing oxygen to the bloodstream and removing carbon dioxide.

One by one entire systems come on line: liver, intestines, immune system, kidneys. A little life that was utterly dependent upon its mother for oxygen, water, warmth, immunity to disease and daily nourishment is now on its own.

It's the beginning of a new journey.

Everything upside down!

When God speaks of birthing Israel for a new day and a new journey, He describes it in terms of the whole world being turned upside down:

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Isaiah 42:15 NIV

"I will lay waste the mountains and hills and dry up all their vegetation; I will turn rivers into islands and dry up the pools."

Up to this time, Israel's homeland was the desert – desolate and neglected. Babylon was the well-watered world where everything prospered. But God says that when He births Israel anew, things will be reversed. Babylon will become deserted and desolate; Israel will become well-watered and prosperous.

As God had promised just a chapter before:

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Isaiah 41:18 NIV

"I will make rivers flow on barren heights, and springs within the valleys. I will turn the desert into pools of water, and the parched ground into springs."

Transformation:

When God births new things, *everything changes*, not just a few details. Just as a baby's first breath initiates a host of internal transformations, God's transforming power touches every area of our lives.

Things that once grew like weeds in our lives now shrivel up and die. Things that we never took time to nurture in our lives now begin to flower and bear fruit. These aren't unrelated little changes that just happen to take place. They are all part of a brand new life – the life of the Creator God expressed in us through His Spirit.

Paul writes that as followers of Jesus, you have:

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Colossians 3:9b-10 NIV

...you have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator.

This is what Jesus was talking about when He told a religious leader that he needed to be “born again” or “born from above.” No going back to the old life. Total transformation!

A New Path

The greater journey:

That first journey was measured in hours and inches. But now the journey is measured by a totally different set of milestones: birthdays, report cards, inches on a door jamb, driver's license, graduation, finding a life partner.

And then one day we learn that the journey is beginning all over again for a little person that we will get to meet 9 months from now.

There's no map for this greater journey. None of us have been here before. Discovering the path is the biggest part of the journey.

Israel's new journey:

The same was true for Israel and its journey back to the Promised Land. There was no map for this journey. No one had ever done this before. All of the old landmarks were gone: city, temple, king, kingdom. Going back wasn't a return to anything; it was a brand new beginning.

That is why God describes the journey He will take them on as one taken on an unfamiliar path, a path that only He knows:

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Isaiah 42:16-17 NIV

"I will lead the blind by ways they have not known, along unfamiliar paths I will guide them; I will turn the darkness into light before them and make the rough places smooth. These are the things I will do; I will not forsake them."

To take this journey, Israel would have to forget what they thought they knew. They would have to stop being the experts. They would have to acknowledge that they didn't have a clue about the way forward. They were in uncharted territory.

Most of all, they would have to trust that God knew the way and would faithfully guide them. They would have to trust that when everything seemed dark and hopeless, God would light the way. They would have to trust that God would go ahead of them and smooth out the impassible places in the path.

God issues a warning against relying on false gods or depending on their own resources:

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Isaiah 42:17 NIV

"But those who trust in idols, who say to images, 'You are our gods,' will be turned back in utter shame."

There's no shame in admitting that you don't know the way forward, especially if you haven't taken this journey before!

A new path:

Remember what the LORD said to a despondent and frightened Jacob?

"I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land."

Well, now God is saying it again. He will make a new path for a new time and a new journey. It doesn't matter that they haven't traveled this way before. God promises to not forsake them. He will watch over them wherever they go, and bring them home.

And He offers to do the very same for you. It will be a path you never would have found on your own. It will take you where you've never been before. But it will bring you home!

Just ask Jacob. Never could he have imagined the way home! He left single; he returned married with lots of children. He left penniless; he returned a wealthy man. He left fearing the wrath of the brother he had cheated; he returned reconciled and forgiven.

Oh, and on the way he met God one more time. This time a stranger jumped him in the middle of the night when he was all alone. When the struggle ended, the stranger gave him a new name – a new name for a new path and a new time!

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Genesis 32:28 NIV

Then the man said, "Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with men and have overcome."

Jacob's struggle was God's own struggle – the birthing of a new person. No longer Jacob, which means "deceiver," but now Israel – which means "he struggles with God."

What is God birthing in you? What kind of struggle will it take to get there?

Welcome to the new path!