

Lucia Lloyd's sermon
Easter 5, Year A
1 Peter 2:2

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The breastfeeding God

Today's program is sponsored by Sylvia Pencak in honor of Todd and Wendy Bingham.

Happy Mother's Day! A few days ago, one of our parishioners mentioned that she'd lost track of which day of the week it was. Another parishioner said "It's Tuesday". And then a third parishioner said, with great enthusiasm, "It's the Tuesday after Good Shepherd Sunday!" So it always makes me happy to see that people are paying attention in church.

Happy Quasimodo Sunday! I had never heard of Quasimodo Sunday until one of our parishioners brought it up a few weeks ago, and at first I thought he was joking. Then when I looked it up it turns out to be a real thing. We will get back to that in a few minutes.

We have been talking lately about the variety of images scripture gives us for picturing God, such as light, bread, shepherd, gate. Each of these images teaches us something about God; no one image tells us everything about God. We are accustomed to picturing God as our Father, and there are plenty of examples of scriptures that present that image. On the Fifth Sunday of Easter season in Year A, which is today, we get a scripture that presents a different view of our relationship with God. Our scripture today from 1 Peter 2:2 presents this image: "Like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation—if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good." Where does a newborn infant's milk come from?

In the era in which our scriptures were written, newborn infants got their milk from breastfeeding mothers. Our scripture tells us that our relationship with God is to be like a newborn infants longing for their mother's milk.

Our scripture today, which happens to fall on Mother's Day, gives us this lovely maternal image of a little baby being comforted and fed while snuggled in its mother's arms. Not only that, our scripture extends the image of a breastfeeding God to say that we have tasted that God is good.

We might be a bit uncomfortable talking about breastfeeding. That might be partly the effect of advertising, which uses women's breasts so often to sell things like beer, that we tend to forget that they can be a food source for our little ones. Or it may be that we feel a bit of a taboo about mentioning breastfeeding in church. And yet it is not unusual for us to mention 'circumcision' in church. And circumcision is not quite as pleasant for babies as breastfeeding is.

Or is the real issue about our concept of God? There have been various people over the years who've said that it is unreasonable for women to object to depictions of God as a member of the opposite sex, because we all know that God has both masculine and feminine attributes. So when men come across a depiction of God as a member of the opposite sex, does the same thinking apply? And if we can never talk about God in female terms, what do women lose? What do men lose?

This image of a breastfeeding God does not come from a feminist theologian in 21st century America; it comes directly from scripture. It may be that in some ways we are more squeamish about talking about a breastfeeding God than the ancient author of 1st Peter. And it isn't just in scriptures either. This image of a breastfeeding God is used in the liturgy of the church. After our parishioner mentioned Quasimodo Sunday, I looked it up. If you think the number of people who've heard of Good Shepherd Sunday is small, the number of people in modern times who've ever heard of Quasimodo Sunday is way, way, smaller. But we'll take a brief detour there because it's interesting, and then return to the main theological point of today's sermon. What I found is when I looked it up is that the church was using this scripture in the liturgy as the text of the introit of the day. The church liturgy was all in Latin at the time. So in English this verse begins, "like the way newborn infants... In Latin it begins, "Quasi modo geniti infantes..." Victor Hugo's novel *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* was set in Paris in 1482, and written in 1831. At the beginning of it, the archdeacon Claude Frollo, who finds an infant abandoned on the doorsteps of Notre Dame Cathedral on a Sunday morning, adopts and baptizes the baby. Apparently Quasimodo Sunday was so well known among Victor Hugo's readership that he says merely,

"He baptized his adopted child and called him Quasimodo...it was that he chose thereby to commemorate the day when he had found him"

So the awareness of this scriptural image of a breastfeeding God was apparently far more widespread then than it is now. For those who are really into the details of arcane ecclesiastical trivia or arcane literary trivia on the birthdate of fictional hunchbacks, I will add that at the time Quasimodo Sunday was the second Sunday of Easter season. Since we don't use introits now, the day the quasi modo geniti infantes scripture comes up in our lectionary seems like the appropriate Sunday for Quasimodo Sunday.

At any rate, even if the image of a breastfeeding God is a bit outside our comfort zone, that's okay. When we stretch our comfort zone, our comfort zone becomes bigger, and our faith itself can be enlarged.

The theological point is that this scripture deals with our spiritual hunger. All of us want a deeper sense of God's presence in our lives, a sense of holiness, a sense of transcendence. We want the gifts of the spirit in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. We want souls that radiate with the love of God.

But we adults don't always pay attention to what we are hungry for. I have sometimes sat in front of the television screen with a full bag of potato chips beside me, and half an hour later suddenly realized that the bag is empty, because I had been mindlessly putting into my mouth chips that I wasn't really hungry for, and didn't really want, and didn't even enjoy. How often do we put spiritual junk food into our souls? There have been other times when I have been so busy and preoccupied that I have skipped a meal and refused to pay attention to my hunger, with the result that I am irritable and impatient with people. And then afterward, I eat whatever I can get my hands on fastest, rather than sitting down for a decent meal. How often do we skip meals spiritually and refuse to pay attention to our spiritual hunger? And what effect does it have on our souls?

We could probably take a lesson from infants. When they are hungry, they know it, and they do not mess around. When newborns are hungry for milk, they long for it. They cry for it, as if their life depended on it. Because, of course, it does. And the milk they long for is exactly what meets their needs. In fact, the milk a woman's body produces when her baby is a newborn is different from the milk she produces a month or

two later, because it fits different needs at different stages of her baby's development. And so it is in our spiritual lives, that God meets our needs in different ways as our faith development goes through different stages. Even the scriptures themselves speak to us in different ways as time goes on.

We adults so often thwart our real desires. As C. S. Lewis writes,

“If there lurks in most modern minds the notion that to desire our own good and earnestly to hope for the enjoyment of it is a bad thing, I submit that this notion has crept in from Kant and the Stoics and is no part of the Christian faith. Indeed, if we consider the unblushing promises of reward and the staggering nature of the rewards promised in the Gospels, it would seem that Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling around with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea.”

So take the beach vacation! Instead of filling your life with things that don't really satisfy, go ahead and indulge your spiritual longings, even if you have drifted far away from them. Especially if you have drifted far away from them. Like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation.

Our scripture tells us that the spiritual longings themselves are good. You don't have to be perfect. You don't have to have God all figured out. The important thing is to keep longing. And remember that like a loving mother, God wants to take care of her baby. God has plenty of milk to fill your longing.

The point of this longing for the pure spiritual milk is that by it you may grow into salvation. As a newborn grows, its longing for milk does not stop. As a newborn grows, its appetite grows too. It is a beautiful thing to see the deep bliss of a baby who has just been well fed. It is a beautiful thing to see the joy in people's spirits when God has provided exactly what the person needed. And paradoxically, having our longing satisfied makes our longing even deeper. If you have tasted that God is good, then go ahead and long for the pure, spiritual milk, like newborn infants.

One of the reasons that eating the bread and drinking the wine at the Eucharist is so powerful, is that it reminds us that we need to keep coming back to be fed spiritually, just as we need to keep coming back to be fed physically. Just as one good meal will not sustain us forever, no matter how satisfying it is, one good spiritual experience will not

sustain us forever. We need to be fed at regular intervals, like newborn infants, longing for the pure, spiritual milk, because we have tasted that God is good.

If you feel a little strange about the Eucharistic idea of being fed from another person's body, today's scripture offers you the opportunity to reflect on the thought that newborns throughout the centuries have been fed from another person's body. God's love flows as naturally as a mother's milk.

What are the longings in your soul? A longing for peace? For strength? For comfort? For deep love? When you feel any of these longings, you can imagine yourself as a small baby, with a loving mother picking you up and embracing you, and soothing you, and singing to you about how much she loves you, and feeding you with warm milk that makes you feel comforted, and loved, and at peace. You can picture God caring for you as a loving mother cares for her little baby.

Your longing for God is good in itself. When you need care the most, even if you cannot form a prayer in words, you can picture yourself like a newborn infant, longing for the pure, spiritual milk, because you have tasted that God is good. Happy newborn day!