

**Rev. Maeve Hammond**  
**“Leaped for joy”**  
**Psalm 139:1-18 | Luke 1:39-45**  
**May 14, 2023 (Mother’s Day, Sixth Sunday of Easter)**

I invite you to join me in prayer. Mothering God, Creator of all good things, Companion in life, we ask You to guide our understanding of Your sacred word in this time. May our understanding flow from a place of peace, calm, and openness. Amen.

When I was eighteen, the summer after I graduated from high school, I enrolled in a doula-training course. I’m sure most of you are already familiar with the term “doula,” but, if you’re not, birth doulas attend to the needs of parents before, during, and after the birth of their child or children. I was one of the youngest in the course—I believe the second-youngest was a recent college graduate. Mothers, grandmothers, an expectant parent, and others who (like me) had never given birth sat around me in the yellow living room of a home from the late 1800s in Ann Arbor, Michigan. Some sat in deep-set, cushy couches. Others sat cross-legged on the floor atop meditation cushions and woven blankets. We talked about the different options that our prospective clients, expecting parents, may want: hospital or birth center, on their back or squatting, water birth or “land” birth, natural birth or cesarean, epidural or drug-free, the possibilities for an intended birth plan were endless. As you may have already picked up, this doula cohort had a hippie vibe, and the instructor taught us about teas, natural remedies, lower back massages, and exercises to help manage pain. I’m sure some of you who have given birth or been in the room with someone giving birth are going “yeah, right” and rolling your eyes at this thought. But, I was hooked.

About halfway through our first day of training, the instructor put on a birth video. We gathered around her laptop, our eyes glued to the screen as we watched a mother (who we didn’t know) pushing, her medical team helping her, her partner squeezing her hand, for several minutes until her baby emerged head-first into this world. We, a group of strangers united by this

one interest or calling, were grinning from ear to ear, our hearts full and fuzzy-feeling, and our spirits lifted from witnessing the miracle of birth.

I don't exactly remember how I got interested in training to become a birth doula. I do know, however, that this was one instance in my long history of being drawn to learning about parenthood and, in particular, birth. Not only that, but facets of my life have coincided to the point where I have been surrounded by these themes. In school, I found myself drawn to biology and systems of the body. My favorite unit was always the one on the development, growth, and "release" of an individual into the world. Not only that, but I loved learning about the medical and personal story behind people who decide to give birth. I was raised by a single mom, with whom I share an incredibly deep friendship and mother-child relationship. From an early age, I saw from my grandparents, and especially my grandmothers, how the decision of a couple to start a family could lead to so much life.

My godfather is an OBGYN, and I grew up hearing stories about his practice. One of my best friends, Clara, is graduating this spring with her Master of Public Health. During this program, she focused on the care of children and parents, and she is currently working to complete her certification to become a lactation consultant. When I visited her about a year ago, we listened to countless episodes of "The Birth Hour," a podcast all about individuals' birth stories. One of my other best friends, Sarah, (who led a prayer during my ordination!) wrote an undergraduate thesis on fat motherhood, compiling the stories of fat women's (at times harrowing, at others disappointing, others joyful) experiences with medical systems, hospital rooms, and OBGYNs. In college, I took a non-credit course on lactation and postpartum care, again, alongside Clara. A couple of summers ago, when I started my summer unit of hospital chaplaincy, I chose to be the main chaplain of the maternal, fetal, labor and delivery, and postpartum units. Though I'm not a mother, I've witnessed firsthand and heard from others how parenthood *transforms* bodies, connections, and understandings of the self and of our small place in this vast universe.

In preparing for this sermon, I wanted to share some of the history that I've found about the early roots of motherhood and childbirth in our shared tradition. So, let's go back a few thousand years to ancient Israel. In the article "I Arose a Mother in Israel," author Dvora Lederman-Daniely argues that some Hebrew Bible texts present motherhood as a liberating power, especially in the stories of prophetesses and poets Miriam and Deborah.

Lederman-Daniely writes that biased interpretations have obscured women's actual experiences of motherhood. Rather than being seen as the "means of production of the male genealogy" or "marginal compared with fatherhood...secondary in relation to the fathers," "research in [her] field has undermined this biased presentation and uncovered subversive and rebellious stories of the mothers, attesting to a fabric of forces and influences that was concealed and censored" (9). The article references Carol Meyer, whose work argues, "women were much more central in ancient Israel's social, religious and cultural life than portrayed in the biblical text" (Lederman-Daniely 10). Deborah and Miriam's "influence exceed[ed] well beyond the traditional maternal role" (Lederman-Daniely 10). Lederman-Daniely writes, "These two figures are not depicted as perceiving their self-realization in pregnancy and childbirth, or in complying with the patriarchal code. They focus on being the 'Great Mothers' of the nation—life savers, warriors, and trailblazers through their leadership and wisdom" (10). Erella Shadmi calls motherhood in the time of ancient Israel "not merely a compassionate ideal that preserves an existing order, but an active agent of growth, responsibility and intensification—the power source of resistance to the patriarchal institutions"—in other words, *it's an act and site of transformation* (12).

Fast-forwarding to the ancient Roman empire, author June-Ann Greely also agrees with the argument that "all documents and texts about women were written by men and likely primarily for men...[creating a] masculinist 'understanding' of motherhood" in her article "Models of Devotion?" (31). She writes,

Most of the male commentary about motherhood was inherently biased and deliberately designed to wrest the significance of birth from women and apply it to male-dominated

constituencies, thus assuming to themselves the dominion over birth and motherhood. How much of the material can be confidently ascribed to the actual feelings and attitudes of women themselves remain a vexing question and is difficult, if not nearly impossible, to ascertain. (31)

Mothers were, indeed, vital to early Christianity. This faith grew not only because women gave birth and produced offspring who would become Christian, but rather because they found themselves represented in the messages of Christ and other proclaimed Christ-followers (Greeley 32).

I have two pieces of unsurprising news. Here's the first piece: the Roman empire saw the role of the mother-wife as the progenitor of the *oikos*, or the domestic sphere, meaning that her identity belonged to her husband's homestead and her work reflected that belonging. Motherhood, then, and particularly the mothering of boys, was a primary duty of the Roman mother-wife. In fact, as a PBS article reports, "The influence of women only went so far. The paterfamilias had the right to decide whether to keep newborn babies. After birth, the midwife placed babies on the ground: only if the paterfamilias picked it up was the baby formally accepted into the family." Beyond duty, there was a state-sponsored incentive to give birth: again, from PBS, "The Roman state gave legal rewards to women who had successfully given birth. After three live babies (or four children for former slaves), women were recognized as legally independent. For most women, only at this stage could they choose to shrug off male control and take responsibility for their own lives." Here's the second: childbirth was dangerous, as it would remain for centuries after and still remains today in some situations. The people who socially broke free from these two social molds were midwives. Midwives provided pre/peri/postpartum care, healthcare, and advice for improved hygiene and childcare. Midwifery allowed Roman women to gain independence, wealth, and prestige, even if they played into the culture of harm that would deny a recent mother the choice of keeping her child postpartum.

So, considering all of this history, let's place the Luke passage in the center of this backdrop. God sends the angel Gabriel to Mary to announce her and her cousin Elizabeth's

pregnancies: “the child to be born will be holy; he will be called the Son of God” (Luke 1:35). After hearing the angel’s words, Mary rushes to visit Elizabeth. In the moment of them seeing each other, the Holy Spirit fills Elizabeth and her expected child, John the Baptist, “leaped for joy” in Elizabeth’s womb. “*Leaped for joy*” in Elizabeth’s womb. Was John the Baptist simply kicking, or did he and Elizabeth together sense something holy and magnificent in their presence in the form of Mary and the second life inside her? Under the known weights, constraints, expectations, and fears of carrying, delivering, and rearing a child during this ancient time, both Mary and Elizabeth express praise, excitement, and readiness as they embark on this transformative journey to parenthood. They are not defined by patriarchal conventions; rather, they defiantly take on the task of transforming mind, body, and spirit to create new life. They are not just mother-wives, products and progenitors of patriarchy, but rather their own people—like Miriam and Deborah, “life savers, warriors, and trailblazers through their leadership and wisdom” (10).

Though I’ve focused on biological motherhood for a while now, it should be said that motherhood comes into our lives in a variety of ways, as I’m sure many of you in the sanctuary and watching online can recognize. One needn’t give birth to be a mother, to be a person of transformation, of care, of wisdom: adoptive mothers, chosen mothers, folks who mother regardless of gender. It should also be said that, like in the case of women of ancient Rome, the mother-child relationship is rarely ever easy. There is often, between moments of joy, grief in motherhood—loss, drifting apart, change, distance, unresolved tension.

On this Mother’s Day, may we remember and uplift the ones who mothered us, and the ones who we mother, and the Divine being who is Mother and Father and Parent to us all. May we be spaces of transformation unto others and unto ourselves. Amen.