

BIRTH

A homily by Renee Kingsland

Given at Wildflower Church on Sunday, January 4, 2009

Good morning. Since Eliza asked me to give this homily on birth, I have spent many hours reflecting and remembering my pregnancies and the births of my two children, Harper and Zach. Birth is such a powerful and mysterious rite of passage, and I had a hard time trying to figure out what I really wanted to say, and how to fit that into a 6-7 minute homily.

When I think about the births of my children, I still feel overwhelmed with emotions, especially when I remember my first pregnancy with Harper, seven years ago. I thought I would be pregnant right away, but after seven months of failing to conceive a child, I realized that some things are beyond my control. As soon as I accepted this fact and decided to be patient, she was conceived. I had been so consumed with getting pregnant that I hadn't anticipated the next steps. So after the reality of being pregnant set in, I had a lot of decisions to make.

- What books should I read?
- What kind of childbirth classes should I take?
- Should I have a natural childbirth?
- Should I use a doctor or a midwife?
- Should I give birth at home or in a hospital?
- What are my fears about birth?
- And finally the big question: what do I believe about myself, and what I am capable of?

I remember my grandma telling me that birth was easy. She said the doctor gave her ether and when she woke up she had a baby! I talked to my mother about her four births. She felt that medical intervention had robbed her of utilizing her own power and inner wisdom.

So I decided that birth should not be a medical event. I was afraid that medical interventions would take away my ability to react instinctively. I was afraid that being connected to machines would make me disconnected from my own body. I wanted a natural childbirth so I could fully experience birth and surrender to its power and mystery.

I found a group of midwives who delivered at Seton Medical Center, and I took HypnoBirthing classes. I felt the need to go further inward, and I didn't want to be bombarded by a stream of information. I believed that there is such a thing as knowing too much, and that my body, and baby, would know what to do. I listened to the relaxation tapes and practiced meditating. One of the visualization techniques I used was to imagine a flower opening.

Well, this worked too well, because when I was only 30 weeks pregnant I was admitted to the hospital after an examination revealed signs of pre-term labor. My dream of a non-medical pregnancy and birth was suddenly shattered. I was lying in a hospital bed with an IV, and connected to an electronic fetal monitor. I was in disbelief as I watched the machine measure my contractions. Did these machines know better than me that I was about to have a baby? I was confused and scared. After two days in the hospital, the doctors sent me home on bed rest. I still wonder whether this medical intervention was necessary and whether it was responsible for what happened later.

Back at home, Jeff made me a bed in the living room and family and friends took turns bringing me meals. I continued to practice the HypnoBirthing meditations and visualization techniques, but this time the flower was closing! I tried to see my situation as a much needed rest period before staying up at night feeding and caring for a newborn baby.

But within a couple weeks I was back at the hospital with excruciating pain in both kidneys. The diagnosis was hydronephrosis, a blockage similar to a kidney stone, and the treatment was a procedure that might start labor and required spinal anesthesia. We decided to wait until I was 35 weeks pregnant to give the baby more time to develop. In the meantime, Demerol provided me relief from the pain. I remember so clearly the almost euphoric "rush" that I felt when the nurse administered the drug intravenously. I seemed to float away to another place and my stress and worries melted away with me. I would wake up every few hours, and felt comforted hearing Harper's heartbeat on the fetal monitor and seeing Jeff sitting by my side, keeping watch over me.

Finally, when I was 35 weeks pregnant it was time for treatment, and the spinal anesthesia. I remember the surreal experience of being paralyzed from the chest down, and knowing that I did not want to give birth that way.

After I regained feeling in the bottom half of my body, the excruciating pain was gone, but my emotions were painfully present. After weeks of being in and out of the hospital and worrying about the baby and what kind of birth I would have, I was at the

end of my rope. And I could tell that the last few weeks had taken a toll on Jeff. He had been at my side the whole time, and since my mom had just arrived from Michigan, we sent him home to sleep in his own bed.

Now, I know that this story has gone from bad to worse, but what happened next was truly magical. My water broke in the middle of the night, and I called Jeff back to the hospital. My labor didn't begin with small, intermittent contractions like the books said it would. It started with the BIG ones! For the first time in weeks I felt strong and powerful as I rode on enormous surge after surge of the life force within me. I reacted instinctively by moving around the room, biting on a washcloth and holding on to Jeff while my body worked at opening and letting the new life emerge. Having just experienced the kind of pain that was meant to tell me something was wrong, it's hard to describe what I felt as "pain".

Before long I was doing the hard work of pushing and I reached down and felt Harper's head crowning. Another push and her head emerged from my body screaming, with a healthy set of lungs. One last push and the rest of her body followed. My midwife waved away the neonatal intensive care team that was ready to whisk her to the NICU. After I held her to my breast and greeted her for the first time, Jeff cut the umbilical cord and she was a completely separate being—just like that.

After the birth I felt more exhilarated and spiritual than ever before. I suddenly felt connected to all the other mothers throughout history. And I was completely free of all pain and riding a huge wave of endorphins – it was such a natural high!

Two years later I was fortunate enough to experience birth again—this time without the bed rest and kidney pain, and Zach was a full term baby.

I had spent the first decade of my adult life living for only myself, working on my career, traveling, going out every night, having a disposable income, and yet, I was getting bored and yearned for more. Now I have a family to share my life with. My choices no longer only affect me. I am held accountable and loved unconditionally. I have gained patience and empathy and an appreciation for simplicity. I am forced to focus on what's most important in life, and I have no time for complacency. I am asked time and time again to work harder, go deeper, and find my higher self.