

Creating with God

Sarah Jobe

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THE HOLY CONFUSING
BLESSEDNESS OF PREGNANCY



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Creating with God: The Holy Confusing Blessedness of Pregnancy

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To Naomi and Fay,

**who held my fingers in their sticky hands
as we all grew up together.
I realized my own worth as I marveled at yours.**

And to Dan,

**who has scooted ever closer to the edge of the bed
to make room for us all.
I see Jesus in you.**



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Author's Note

AS I WAS FINISHING THIS BOOK, my best friend Holly was carefully boxing up her maternity clothes. Holly explained to me that she actually cried while putting them in the attic, realizing that she didn't get to be pregnant any more. Holly can't wait for baby number three and the opportunity to take her maternity clothes out of storage.

I love Holly. But I think you should know, right from the start, that I'm not that type of pregnant woman. After back-to-back pregnancies, I gave away every stitch of maternity clothing I owned in the hopes that any future children might think twice before nestling into the wall of my uterus. I won't say that I hated pregnancy. But I can't say that I loved it either. Pregnancy was the most difficult endeavor I have ever undertaken.

Don't misunderstand; nothing actually went wrong during my pregnancies. According to my midwives, my pregnancies were "uncomplicated." But I have decided that *uncomplicated* is one of those words that just doesn't apply to even the most straightforward of births. Pregnancy is the most complicated mess I've ever gotten myself into.

I don't know what I expected from pregnancy. I had heard that pregnancy was a blessing, and I think I hoped to feel special, encouraged, or invigorated by being blessed. Instead, I felt exhausted. As in, someone peel me off the floor

and have the decency to deposit me in my bed exhausted. I think I hoped for some sort of warm maternal feeling to well up within me. But the only thing welling up on a regular basis was heartburn. I had hoped to meet physical challenges with grace. Instead, I found myself collapsing daily onto my bathroom floor, the neighbors' couch, or the sidewalk in front of my office. I was a mess of tears, snot, backache, and self-doubt. Not exactly graceful.

Perhaps the hardest thing about pregnancy was that I couldn't figure out where God was in all of it. I was in the midst of the most transformative event of my life and God seemed nowhere to be found. I was too tired for my traditional spiritual disciplines. Worship services seemed designed for nonpregnant people who could sit in a pew without painfully swollen ankles and raging sciatic nerve pain. And any part of Christianity that had to do with being an energetic and cheerful giver seemed about as possible as fitting into my pre-pregnancy jeans.

This book was born from my attempt to cling to the idea that pregnancy is a blessing in spite of my experience to the contrary. I began the book wondering how God could be present in pregnancy *in spite of* back pain, financial stress, hormonal shifts, and constipation. But as I wrote, I have learned a startling truth. God is not present in pregnancy *in spite of* all the crap (and I mean that in the most literal sense). God is present in pregnancy at precisely the places that seem least divine.

This book is an attempt to name how pregnant women are co-creators with God at precisely the moment in which we are pooping on the delivery table. I will claim that pregnant women are the image of Jesus among us not in spite of varicose veins but because of them. I will explore how the practices we take up on behalf of our growing babies train us in the very practices we need to live a life of faith.

Pregnancy is at the heart of God's work in the world. Pregnant women are the image of God among us. But those truths are sometimes hard to see. This book is an attempt to wipe off the mirrors we use to see ourselves. I hope you will go from this book able to see yourself differently. I hope you might learn to see God when you look in the mirror.

There is no need to read the chapters of this book in the order given. When I was pregnant, I experienced an odd upheaval in my reading style. One day I would wake up completely obsessed with birth positions and know that I could not possibly eat breakfast until I had scoured our birth books for a list of all the possible positions in which I might labor. A few days of intense research would ensue (with attendant birth ball purchase), and then the interest would be gone. A few days later I might wake up needing to know everything about fetal hiccups.

Follow your interests when deciding which chapters to read. The chapters are arranged theologically and have

a certain sense. The first section describes the ways that women partner with God in the work of pregnancy. The second section describes specific ways that pregnant women become the image of Christ among us. The last section describes how the practices of pregnancy might train us in the spiritual disciplines we need for a life of faith.

But pregnant brains don't always need theological sense. Sometimes we just want to know about ultrasounds, and on that day you should read chapter 3.

You might also want a warning that chapters 4, 6, and 8 contain stories of loss and difficulty in childbirth. There were many days during my pregnancies where the last thing I needed was even the first hint of a sad story. Avoid chapters 4, 6, and 8 on those days.

Whatever order you choose, I pray that these chapters might be a gift, ideally a more straightforward sort of gift than pregnancy itself. I still can't bring myself to say that I love pregnancy. But deep down, I really do. Pregnancy is a place where heaven and earth meet and constipation takes on cosmic significance. What's not to love?



PART ONE

Mothering with God the Father



1

Co-Creating with God

"I have created a man with God!"

GENESIS 4:1

I ATTENDED MY FIVE-YEAR COLLEGE REUNION four months pregnant, with my one-year-old daughter in tow. I knew that none of my immediate friends had children. I knew that most of my classmates were in the first, fast-paced years of careers they had been anticipating for a lifetime. I knew that I had not lost the weight of my first pregnancy before getting pregnant with my second and that I was in that awkward period where I didn't really look pregnant per se, more like severely bloated, or maybe like someone who had been dipping a bit too generously into the postdinner ice cream carton.

I thought I had taken these facts into account when planning for the reunion. While I could still fit into some pre-pregnancy clothes, I planned to wear only my trendiest maternity outfits—the ones with empire waists and expanding ties in the back. I figured I would give my nonpregnant peers every indication that I was pregnant and

not just an extremely liberal ice cream eater (or rather, that I was pregnant, and *thus understandably* an extremely liberal ice cream eater).

I had thought about the most impressive ways of narrating my ten-hour-a-week job. I had reminded myself that other people didn't want to hear about how my daughter Naomi had started walking on the early side and was in the 97th percentile for her height (a clear sign of an ingenious, generally spectacular person, if you ask me). I had committed to be the energetic, charismatic woman I hoped people remembered from college . . . only pregnant and toting a baby.

I had no idea what I was in for.

We got into town and drove immediately to a reception for an academic program that had been a huge part of my college experience. My closest friends had been in the program, and I figured it would be the safest place to experiment with being the only pregnant mom in a room. Within the first hour, I heard about a woman's career on Wall Street, one man's backpacking trip throughout Europe, and another man's success in preventing communicable diseases in a country I wasn't sure I had ever heard of before.

My complete mental breakdown came as I was listening to a perfectly coiffed woman named Alyssa explain that she had recently become a "personal life assistant." My husband,

Dan, had clearly forgotten his instructions to usher me out of conversations like this one. Alyssa explained that she had just taken the red-eye from San Francisco, and I wondered how one could sit on a plane overnight and emerge without a single wrinkle on a silk skirt designed by someone with a well-known Italian name in a size that I couldn't wear even before back-to-back pregnancies.

"Now what, exactly, is a life assistant?" I asked. I should have seen the silk skirt, made the obvious assumptions, and found a way to exit the conversation. But I honestly had no idea what a life assistant was, and if it happened to be some sort of social service, I was quite sure I could use one. With one baby and another on the way, I needed all the assistance I could get.

Alyssa's eyes sparkled as she launched into an explanation about people with lots of money but very little time maximizing their social potential. I was really only half listening to Alyssa because the other half of me was listening to the garbled beginnings of speech bubbling up from the one-year-old attached to my leg. Even with the distraction, it quickly became clear that folks like me, those with both little time *and* little money, did not have the privilege of life assistants.

I could see Dan sampling the free cheeses across the room, oblivious to my impending breakdown. Naomi's half-speech was becoming more intense, and I looked down

just in time to see her finish smearing her bit of free cheese across my only pair of black maternity capris. Just when the comparison between Alyssa's silk skirt and my cheesy capris was becoming completely unbearable, my best friend swept into the room. She yelled my name and ran through the crowd, pushing the silk skirt away with a needed hug. I pretended that my tears were from joy at seeing her again. As we headed to our favorite ice cream shop, I couldn't help but think, "What am I doing with my life?"

Pregnancy is a blessing. At least, that's what people told pregnant women throughout my life. I heard it when I got pregnant with my first child. Of course, when I got pregnant *again* eight months after the birth of my first child, the "blessing" line morphed into something more like, "You've got your work cut out for you. But of course, children are such a blessing."

The rhetoric at my reunion was no different. I spent the weekend hearing a continual round of, "Congratulations!" I also heard a heavy dose of, "You are so lucky!" coupled with covetous looks and not-so-hidden jabs delivered to the ribs of husbands and boyfriends who seemed eager to excuse themselves to the bar, where, of course, there were no obnoxious pregnant ladies giving their partners "ideas." I even heard the occasional, "You look happier than you've ever looked!" Which made me seriously worry about what

sort of impression I made in college. But as my ankles swelled up in Virginia's June heat and I missed the reunion nightlife due to sheer exhaustion (and Naomi's bed time), I couldn't help but think, "Remind me again exactly how pregnancy is a blessing?"

Everyone seemed to embrace the party line that pregnancy is something to be celebrated. But I noticed that of the hundreds of women there, only one other woman was pregnant. Somehow, the blessing of pregnancy wasn't yet enough to lure others away from careers and travel and social engagements that are much more difficult to do with a baby either in utero or out.

And from my position as the lone pregnant woman, it seemed that perhaps my peers had made the better decision. Pregnancy is hard work, but it affords none of the possibility for advancement that careers offer. The work of pregnancy is not paid. There are no awards or systems for external recognition. It's not something to write on one's resume. Pregnancy is something of a relationship, but it's not like investing in the mutuality of friendships or romantic relationships. I felt like I was giving a lot more than I was getting from my relationships with my unborn children. Pregnancy requires an entire life change, much of which is about giving up basic enjoyments like wine, cheese, Advil, and the possibility of walking short distances free of sciatic nerve pain.

We insist that pregnancy is a blessing, but women are waiting longer and longer to get pregnant. And it's no wonder. Women have more and more to lose, and neither society nor the church have taken time to name the specific ways that pregnancy is work worth undertaking.

Eve is the first woman to ever give birth. She delivers a little boy named Cain, and she exclaims, "I have created a man with God!" Even if you know that these words come from Genesis 4:1, you won't find them in most English Bibles. The King James Version has Eve exclaim, "I have gotten a man from the Lord," as if God sent Cain in a brightly wrapped package complete with bow and operating instructions. In the New International Version, Eve says, "With the help of the Lord I have brought forth a man." Some translations like the Revised Standard Version combine the two, saying, "I have gotten a man with the help of the LORD." Across the board, English translators seem to avoid the straightforward meaning of these four Hebrew words: I have created a man with God.

The verb that Eve uses to describe what she has done is not the standard word used for labor and delivery. Eve uses the word *create* to describe her work. And Eve says nothing of having God's "help" in the matter. She uses a short preposition that very plainly means "with." She doesn't create with God's help. She creates *with* God. In her joy at

giving birth, Eve boldly claims her status as a co-creator. Her claim is startling.

Her claim is even more startling if you've read the three chapters leading up to her exclamation. The first thing the Bible says about God is that God is Creator. Chapters 1–3 of Genesis take time to outline the details of God's creative activity. This Israelite creation narrative would have stood alongside other creation narratives of the time, boldly claiming that the God of Israel, and no others gods, created the heaven, earth, sun, moon, and stars. Only the God of Israel can claim creative powers. And then comes Eve. She is one of God's creations, and yet she claims that she too has the power to create alongside God.

Even more startling is that she claims this creative power at the moment of childbearing. Just a few verses prior, the pains of childbearing had been named as curse. Genesis 2–3 tells the story of how Adam and Eve disobeyed God's command and ate the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. When God finds out about the trespass, the curses start flying. The serpent who tempted them is cursed. The ground is cursed. Death is introduced to human life, and Adam and Eve are sent out of the garden. Pain is introduced into childbearing. Genesis 3:16 says, "I will make your pains in childbearing very severe; with painful labor you will give birth to children."

The story of Eve's labor and delivery is the very next story in the Bible. If I were writing it, I would highlight the pain that Eve experienced. I would make extra effort to show how the curse was fulfilled in this first experience of labor. I might even throw in a little video footage, so everyone would be sure to hear Eve's groans. Ideally, Eve would give a rousing speech of repentance as she holds little Cain in her arms.

But the Bible says no such thing. Not a word is given about birth pains, even though elsewhere the Bible is quick to associate labor with pain. Instead of pain, the writers of Scripture pass down Eve's strong, joyful exclamation, "I have created a man with God!"

Eve knows something that we are slow to admit. Eve realizes, as she experiences the power of pregnancy and labor, that she is involved in God's work. Eve knows God as the creator of heaven and earth. Eve knows God as the one who created her and her partner Adam. And then she finds herself creating a whole new human being, too. She can't help but notice that this is the sort of work her God is busy with. And as she brings that new life into the world, she is filled with pride at having taken on divine activity. She has been God's hands and feet and womb in the world. She has been given the gift of doing God's work, and the knowledge of it changes her curse to blessing.

Eve names her son “Cain.” The word in Hebrew sounds like the word Eve used earlier for “create.” Cain’s name will forever tell her story. His name will testify to her power as a creator. His name will remind him that his birth was not a curse but a blessing because it gave his mother the opportunity to partner with God. The truth is, each of us could name our newborn “Cain.”

My family will not let me forget that I used to want to name my child Chlorene. When I was twelve years old, I announced this choice to my family. Before announcing it, I hadn’t given a thought to the fact that “Chlorene” sounds exactly like “chlorine.” I thought the vowel sounds in the word rolled together beautifully. I loved the way my mouth felt saying it. Of course, the announcement was met with a brief silence before my younger siblings broke into uproarious laughter that has continued to this day whenever the subject of baby names is brought up.

After a few months of daily ridicule, I rescinded my choice of name. Chlorene might sound lovely, but I couldn’t name my child after a pool-cleansing chemical. The meaning of a name matters.

Pregnant women spend hours researching baby names. From name books to online lists, from family histories to the Bible, anything is a potential source for that perfect name. Dan and I searched for a name that would give our child a vision for her life. We wanted a name with a story. We

wanted an inspirational name. We wanted a name that would connect our child to her family and to the God that we knew loved her even more than we did.

We named our first child Naomi Ruth. We liked the idea of a biblical name, but we didn't want our daughter to feel locked into one biblical character. By choosing two characters from the same story, we hoped to offer the story instead of the characters as inspiration for our daughter's life. The book of Ruth is a story of intergenerational friendship between women. We prayed that Naomi would be gifted with such friendship in her life. The story is about extended family crossing cultural divides to sustain one another. We prayed Naomi would have the courage to reach across some of those same social divisions.

We named our second daughter Fay Marie. Fay is my grandmother's name. Fay also sounds like the Spanish word for "faith." Faith is my mother-in-law's maiden name. We hoped that Fay might one day find the faith in God that has nourished our lives and our marriage. We prayed that she would remain connected to both sides of her family. Marie is a common middle name among my husband's very Catholic relatives. Marie reminds of mother Mary. We prayed that Fay would find a way to embrace both her Baptist and Catholic heritage. We prayed that she would find strong women like Mary to guide her through her life.

We gave both of our daughters the last name Schwankl-Jobe. We don't pretend that it sounds good. It sounds something like a Polish sausage gone wrong. We have learned that you have to be at least three years old to even begin pronouncing it. We hope our daughters will be able to bear the jokes they will no doubt receive in middle school over this name. But we wanted our daughters to carry the histories of both of our families within them. We wanted them to be reminded, every time they introduced themselves, from whence they came.

Names matter. The words we use to name people and things convey meaning. It matters if we say that Eve "acquired" a child "with the help" of God. That is different than saying that Eve and God are co-creators.

This book is about naming. But it's not about naming our babies. It's more about naming ourselves. In this book, I will muster up the courage of Eve, the courage that motherhood has given me, to make some bold and joyous proclamations. I will name the work of pregnancy as the work of God. I will name the pregnant women around me as the image of Christ. I will call the pains of pregnancy "spiritual disciplines."

My prayer is that as we hear ourselves named something new, we will see our phenomenal worth and be encouraged. Naming pregnancy as the work of God has the power to change the curses of it into blessing.

I wish I had known that at the college reunion. I realized over the ensuing year that I didn't know how to answer the question, "So, what are you doing these days?" Because pregnancy doesn't fit on a resume, I had excluded it as a valid answer. Instead, I would answer sort of sheepishly, "Well, I work about ten hours a week, and then, you know, I spend a good bit of time with these little ones," gesturing to the children that were no doubt clinging to various parts of my body. I would then feel pathetic and self-conscious as my conversation partners explained all that they were accomplishing in their fifty-hour-a-week jobs.

But now I'm learning to embrace Eve's bold claim. What I have actually been doing is creating people with God. Now my answer to what I do goes something like, "Well, in my spare time I work for a nonprofit, but I have focused most of my energy on creating two new human beings. It's exhausting work. But I love it." Okay, so I don't always say it out loud. I haven't quite embraced the fullness of Eve's audacious sass. But I at least remind myself of it in the space where I used to feel pathetic and unaccomplished. And it has made all the difference.

2

Delighting in the Details

*“You are precious and honored in my sight,
and . . . I love you.”*

ISAIAH 43:4

MY HUSBAND TOOK OFF WORK the day of our ultrasound. We drove twenty-five minutes together to a hospital in Chapel Hill. There were closer hospitals, but this one partnered with the free-standing midwifery practice we had chosen for the birth of our first daughter. We rode in excited silence, smiling at each other across the stick shift of my husband’s car. I turned on the radio and began changing the stations impatiently. No song seemed fit for the prelude to our first glimpse of our first child. I cut it off again.

“Do you think she’ll be a girl?” I asked. The question was actually more of a squeal than a question. I could barely contain my unabashed hope.

“We will be blessed to have a boy or a girl,” answered my politically correct, frustratingly calm husband.

This exchange had become something of a mantra between us in the past months. While I knew it was unmotherly and

horribly biased, I longed for a girl the way I longed for my mother's cinnamon rolls on Christmas morning. I still don't believe that Dan had no opinion on the subject, but he never deviated from the parental party line that a child of either gender would be delightful.

We settled back into silence. The quiet in the car seemed oddly wrapped around the din of thoughts drumming through my head. "Will the baby be healthy? Will she be moving? Will we be able to see what she looks like? How big will she be? She's not a she! Not a she! Not a she! I will be happy with a boy. I will be happy with a boy. A tiny, lovely, fun, roly-poly boy . . . What will I do with a boy?"

I looked down and realized I was pumping my legs back and forth, a nervous habit I picked up from my mother. The motion is the same as the one you do on those exercise machines meant to work your inner thighs. Except I pump my legs much faster than one can achieve on the exercise machine, neurotically fast, as if am trying to pump out the barrage of questions clogging up my brain. My leg pump seemed to be broken because the questions weren't going anywhere.

"Will she look like me?" My question broke the silence.

Unphased by my excitement, Dan replied, "*He* or she will be lucky to look like you."

I rolled my eyes, but didn't completely overlook the compliment. "He must have just read the chapter on how to be a

calm and effective partner to a neurotic pregnant woman on the way to an ultrasound,” I thought.

Both of us had been pouring over the veritable library of birthing books littering our bedroom floor. We wanted to know what to do, how to eat, what to buy, and how to be prepared. But in truth, all of that was not what kept me turning the pages night after night. In those early months, I read for one reason only. I wanted to know my baby.

I was desperate for any news, and while the authors of those books hadn't met my baby any more than I had, they certainly seemed to know a lot about what *he or she* was doing. They knew what size she was each week. They informed me when she had grown from the size of a pea to the size of a kidney bean. They told me when his little hands grew finger buds, and when his little lungs began to work. They told me when he or she had become a he or she, when her eyelids formed, and when he began to practice sucking. Those books seemed to know details about my baby that I hungered to know, and I delighted in every detail they delivered.

If a picture is worth a thousand words, an ultrasound is worth ten thousand baby books. While I had delighted to learn of my baby's finger buds, now I had the chance to see my particular baby's fingers. I wondered if they would be long and elegant like my husband's grandmother, or short and stubby like mine. Maybe they would be a completely new fusion of the two. I couldn't wait to see them.

After the usual round of paperwork and waiting rooms, we were directed to a dimly lit room. I was invited to recline on something like a dentist's chair, and I remember being annoyed by the way the attendant folded up the bottom of my shirt and unceremoniously squirted a blob of gel on my stomach. My midwives had always squirted the gel onto the handheld device. Somehow that seemed less invasive than a direct squirt on my stomach. I was lost in my own analysis of why the blob of gel was bothering me so much when my husband gasped. I looked up to a blurry black and white image. The screen pulsed and skipped with life. One pattern flashed after another.

"This one's a mover!" exclaimed the attendant. The baby kicked and flipped, and the attendant took a few minutes to orient herself to the movement. My husband squeezed my hand. His face broke into a huge grin and tears flowed down his cheeks. I couldn't take my eyes off the screen to smile back, so I squeezed his hand in mine.

The attendant began cataloguing and measuring the baby's parts. She would freeze the screen every so often and type a word across the image. Kidney . . . Heart . . . Brain . . . We watched the parade of our child's parts with an awe that no Macy's Thanksgiving Day extravaganza has ever evoked. The attendant froze the screen again and began to type, "I-M-A-G-I-R" My husband began to cheer and looked at me as if I should be more excited about this image than the last.

“What?” I asked.

“Read the screen!” he laughed.

“Imagirl?” I asked.

“I’m a girl!” he corrected, launching into an unnecessarily detailed account about how I really wanted a girl and couldn’t imagine having a boy, as if the ultrasound technician really needed to know how far I had strayed from unbiased parental love for all children. But I could barely feel my annoyance underneath the fleecy blanket of joy that had begun to settle over my body. Her little girl parts were flanked by thighs that looked just like my own. They were the “Chilton thighs” that my mother and aunts complained would always be big no matter how skinny the rest of their bodies were. My daughter had my thighs.

The technician warned that a frontal view of her face might be scary, looking more like a skeleton than a person. But the image that appeared revealed a little face with my husband’s jaw line. The fleecy blanket of joy settled on us with a palpable weight, covering me and the little girl who we explored and admired. In the profile picture, I found that she had my nose, a round ball of a nose that is markedly different from the angular slope of my husband’s.

Through the entire ultrasound the baby kicked and squirmed, turning entirely over at one point. She covered her ears and pounded her fist in the air. The technician captured

one image of our daughter holding her triumphant little fist over her head.

“She looks like a punk rocker,” beamed my husband.

“No, she’s demanding power for the people,” I corrected. We smiled together, cherishing this little daughter who already had so much spunk and zeal for life.

When I was in college, my grandmother gave me a framed quotation to hang on my wall. It read, “I have called you by name, Sarah. You are mine. You are precious and honored in my sight, and I love you.” The phrases are taken from Isaiah 43. As I struggled with body image, self-doubt, and all the usual identity crises of young women in their early twenties, I would gaze at that quotation on my wall. I would read it over and over again, repeating it to myself when my worries kept me awake at night. I could barely believe that God thought so highly of me, yet I clung to that truth as if it were a neon orange life preserver.

The quotation suggests that each of us is special in God’s sight. God knows and remembers my particular name, out of all the names of God’s children. God knows me as an individual. God loves me, not in some vague way, but for the quirkiness of who I am. I had trouble understanding this kind of love because I didn’t love my own voice and thighs and pride and intellect as much as God seemed to. But I also had trouble understanding this kind of love because I had never given this kind of love to another person.