

Full of Grace

A NEW YEAR OF LIFE
FOR YOUR BABY-AND FOR YOU!

Claire Noonan

DEDICATION

*To my mother, Mary Lee,
my daughters, Mary Siena
and Margaret Susan,
and to my husband, Tony,
who, in innumerable ways,
made this book possible.*

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Contents

INTRODUCTION

Paying Attention	I
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CHAPTER ONE

Pregnancy and Birth	5
---------------------	---

CHAPTER TWO

0–3 Months	29
------------	----

CHAPTER THREE

3–6 Months	53
------------	----

CHAPTER FOUR

6–9 Months	73
------------	----

CHAPTER FIVE

9–12 Months	97
-------------	----

NOTES	120
-------	-----

Paying Attention

As we enter into this new period of life called motherhood, our attention rightly and necessarily turns to our children. We truly appreciate that our lives are not our own. Some days the demands our children put on us for care and attention are so great that we cannot even manage to take a shower, let alone devote an hour to prayer. This is certainly a common experience. I was out with a friend once who asked me, “How are you?” Not the question posed as a social nicety or with a passing glance, but rather a question asked with sincere concern. Her tone gave me pause and invited a thoughtful

response. Taking a moment to collect myself, much to my own astonishment, the truthful answer that emerged was, “I don’t know.”

So far I had gotten from my inner life that I could not even identify my own feelings when the opportunity for honest connection with a close friend presented itself. Dominican sister and preacher Janet Schlichting, OP, writes, “We wish for a soft, dark peace, a deep velvety silence, a space of soul to reflect, pray, welcome the Word.” But the unavoidable reality of motherhood—especially motherhood embedded in the context of a host of other responsibilities to family, home, work, neighborhood, church—is that space and silence are rarely available. The only velvet we are likely to see is in the laundry basket! But Sr. Janet goes on: “Holding out for more focus, more peace, we are going to miss the coming...God comes to us not because we are ready, or have gotten our desires straight. God comes in Jesus, out of *ecstasis*, the overflowing love of the Trinity, with a divine desire for our healing, our salvation, and our own transformation into living Words.”¹

And so the hope for this book is that there might be another way. Not the way of velvety silences and monastic retreat from ordinary life. Nor the way of frenetic activity breeding disconnection from our

inner life. But rather the way of simple attentiveness and small pauses for prayer and awareness. The hope is that as you pay attention and live with the wonder of your child—conceived, born, growing, and changing—you will begin to see yourself—also growing and changing—with the same eyes full of wonder.

In this volume, I hope to be your companion in encountering and noticing the grace of God revealed in, around, and through *you*. I hope that in entering into this sacred space, you will hear another Voice speak. And that the Voice will remind you that you are “full of grace, the Lord is with you.”

Pregnancy and Birth

Remember the first time you saw an ultrasound? Remember the first stirring of new life that you actually felt—the quickening, as our ancestors used to say, or the “butterfly flutter,” as a friend of mine described it? Remember the first kick or punch? Those movements are sure signs that this little one, though growing within you, is fully her own person.

Remember when you knew that even accounting for your tremendous determination and thoughtful preparations, in some mysterious way, his becoming happens by another power?

Sure, we stop smoking; we put down the cock-

tails; we take in the prescribed milligrams of folic acid. We plot out our maternity leave, decorate the nursery, maybe even open a college fund. We read and consult doctors, psychologists, educators, our mothers, our friends, our sisters. We endure some serious discomfort and inconvenience. We buy diapers and bottles, car seats and cradles, swings and blankets and rockers. Innumerable gizmos and gadgets are offered to us. We make every effort to create the right environment for growth.

By the time you make it to the moment of “meeting” your baby, the first trimester of the pregnancy is already behind you. I have heard some women say that they enjoyed pregnancy, but I have to believe they are in the minority. And sometimes I even harbor suspicions that this minority is deluded, or perhaps slightly revisionary. Maybe they were lucky. Perhaps they are just exceptionally generous and patient. If you are one of these remarkable women, hats off to you. For the rest of us, by the time we make it to this point, we’ve already had the unhappy experience of constant nausea (I always wondered why they call it “morning sickness” when it can literally wake you up in the middle of the night and it regularly disrupts your afternoon routines) and its embarrassing side effects (yes, there are side effects of side effects). On more than one occasion during

my morning commute, I had to pull my car over to the curb to vomit in the tony Chicago suburb where I work. I felt like a drunken college student on her way home from the bars, except without the cover of darkness and the mind-numbing effects of alcohol to mitigate the shame. You have already had to excuse yourself from multiple conversations, both professional and social, to relieve the frequent urge to urinate. Which is strange, awkward, and taxing because you are so early into the pregnancy and the possibility of miscarriage is so high that you probably have not even told your coworkers or your friends that you are expecting. Your breasts are sore; you are exhausted; you feel strange cravings or aversions to food and smells. It is a bizarre experience to have your whole body changing to accommodate a person you haven't even met.

And then, at last, you lie on the examining table. The lights are dimmed; the squishy cool jelly is applied to your belly; the technician passes a wand over you. Maybe at first you see just the black and gray contrasts, perhaps a round shape or an odd angle. But in just a few seconds the wand lands in just the right place. And there she is! The amazing image of your child, so tiny, so fragile, so beautiful, and so uniquely herself.

Despite all of the discomforts and annoyances

you have endured (and you know all of that is far from over), you realize all at once that the formation of this baby is not in your control. For all of this—all of the preparations we make, all of the challenges and changes, even all of the experience of joy we take in—in the end, the growth of the baby in our wombs begins and is brought to birth by the grace of God. And we need only stay awake and pay attention. Pregnancy is a wonder to observe, to participate in, to pay attention to, but it is not—in the end—a work to be done.

MOMENTLY MAKING ME

*Where were you when I founded the earth?
Tell me, if you have understanding,
Who determined its size; do you know?
Who stretched out the measuring line for it?
Into what were its pedestals sunk,
and who laid the cornerstone,
While the morning stars sang in chorus
and all the sons of God shouted for joy?*

JOB 38:4-7

*Truly you have formed my inmost being;
you knit me in my mother's womb.*

*I give you thanks that I am fearfully,
wonderfully made.*

PSALM 139:13–14

And like the conception and development of new life within us, the presence and action of God in our lives is not dependent upon our readiness or our preparation—it is only the manifestation of love.

“We need only to bring our body and mind into the present moment, and we will touch what is refreshing, healing and wondrous,”² writes the Buddhist monk and peacemaker, Thich Nhat Hanh. During our pregnancy, sometimes the baby himself brings us into the present moment. We feel the flutter of those tiny fingers brush against us. We watch the heart pulsing rhythmically on the monitor. For a moment, we have noticed something beautiful, something beyond our plans and machinations, something outside our controls and manipulations. Something not at all unique but still truly awesome.

Just as the development of your baby in the womb is a phenomenon you witness rather than cause, so too is the work of God in your life. Your life and your development are as miraculous and inexplicable as your baby’s. As the new life growing inside you comes as a precious gift, so too are you a gift. We often say it sarcastically, even causti-

cally, to people we feel are too proud: “So you think you’re God’s gift?” But this is a shame, a mocking of the immensity of God’s love and the power of God to create. This is not a joke or a put-down; you *are* God’s gift. Your life is God’s first gift to you, and you are called to make a gift of this life to the world. There is something truly amazing, literally wonder-full in this truth. If only we could notice it.

What if we were to bring the wonder that is awakened in us by the touch of our developing babies to the contemplation of our own lives? Think of it. Did you create yourself? Is the fact of your being, of your body alive, moving, stretching, resting, changing, the result of your own efforts and designs? Bring to mind the most important people in your life. How did you come to know them, to love them? What do you consider to be your greatest personal strengths or most notable talents? Likely, you have worked hard to develop, exercise, and hone them. But did you produce them? Or did they rise up in you spontaneously? Did you feel drawn to pursue them by the interior movements of your heart and mind? Isn’t most everything dear to us fundamentally a gift?

Father Joseph Tetlow, SJ, a master spiritual director in the tradition of St. Ignatius of Loyola, teaches that this is a foundational insight for our

whole spiritual life. The point of departure for all fruitful prayer and reflection on the present questions and concerns of my life is the initial awareness that God's majestic creative power made possible not only my birth, but is "momently making me."³ You are being created not only in your conception, gestation, and birth, but "momently," that is, in every moment. Fr. Michael Himes writes, "God's love is given to you totally, absolutely, perfectly at every moment of your existence. If it was not, you would not be. The only reason anything exists at all is because God loves it."⁴ God's gracious activity and sustaining hope within the specific context of your life "momently," in all its particularity, is a wonder to behold.

NO TWO ALIKE

My two children are now eight and three years old. And though they share the same room and hold in common many similar character traits, their birth stories could not be more different. With my first-born, Mary, I read and planned and worried and generally tried my damndest to orchestrate the whole affair. Once we found out we were expecting, my husband and I began to scour websites, interview friends, and consult "the experts." On the one hand, I was terrifically blessed with excellent medi-

cal care. On the other hand, I was suspicious of the American tendency to commercialize health care and to treat childbirth like an illness. On the one hand, I'd heard horror stories from friends who'd endured hours—even days—of protracted labor in the hospital setting. On the other hand, I was skeptical about all the claims to peace and tranquility I heard from the alternative health care sectors. In the end, I had taken in so many mixed messages about what to expect and what to desire that I couldn't bear to face the experience of giving birth without an expert advocate by our side. So we made plans for a "natural birth," in a hospital under the care of a doctor but with no medicinal interventions. We spent weeks looking for a doula who would accompany us through our first experience of childbirth. On the advice of a good friend, we finally settled on one woman who managed to win our trust—and as a bonus also happened to be a massage therapist!

I gave the same diligent (if slightly neurotic) attention to my professional life, in preparation for my maternity leave. I'd thought through exactly what I could accomplish in the final weeks before the baby would arrive. How would I meticulously prepare all of my papers and projects to hand off to my colleagues, and who would oversee which dimensions of my responsibilities while I was away? I

consulted with my department director, my human resources office, my immediate coworkers, and my student leaders; the whole network was duly conferred with and informed. While my preparations for the arrival of the baby always made me feel a bit overwhelmed, intimidated, and undereducated, my workplace remained an arena in which I still felt competent and on top of things.

As it turned out, both my worries and my expectations were overturned by the astonishing unpredictability of birth. In the thirty-fifth week of my pregnancy, I went in for a regular, scheduled check-up with the obstetrician. Just as she was about to complete the examination and send me on my way, she had what seemed to me a stray thought: "Let me just take a look at your cervix before you go." The impromptu inspection revealed that I was several centimeters dilated and, in fact, already in labor. I'd never heard of such a thing. I had no experience of pain or hint of contractions. But my doctor sent me immediately to the hospital. I remember standing on the street corner outside of her office in the darkness and the rain, calling my husband to pick me up (I'd taken the train to the appointment), telling him that we had to go to the hospital *now*. The baby was already on her way. My husband was equally stunned. This was not a call he expected to get for several more

weeks. The National Weather Service recounts that “the 4th of October was one of the largest warned severe weather events in the history of the National Weather Service in Romeoville [Illinois]. About 43 severe thunderstorm or tornado warnings were issued with almost all of them verified with hail or wind damage.”⁵ Metaphorically speaking, Tony and I were experiencing our own personal tornado. We were praying that the damage would be minimal.

When we arrived at the hospital, the resident examining me began to measure the contractions—increasing in frequency according to the monitoring technology but still imperceptible to the mother! Well known to the mother, due to the long-standing pain associated with a skull wedged between her ribs, but new to the medical personnel involved was the further complicating factor of a baby in breach (meaning feet down, for the novices in the group). This combination called for preparations for an emergency cesarean section. I remember telling the resident that surely she would wait to operate until my own doctor had arrived, and her answering me with a politely disguised, not to say condescending, are-you-completely-nuts-lady voice, “No, we need to move as quickly as possible.” There was no time at all to wait for our carefully chosen and beautifully calming masseuse/doula.

Eventually, my doctor and my husband did join me in the operating room. And our beautiful Mary was born, safe, healthy, and tiny.

Margaret's entrance into the world was completely different. Not easily dissuaded, Tony and I decided to try again for a natural birth. We were supported in our preparations by both my doctor and our newly selected monitrice (who is essentially a doula with a nursing degree). Despite, or perhaps on account of, all of the surprises of Mary's birth, I was much less anxious the second time around. I'd let go, at least a bit, of the idea that I could plan or control this experience (though I did my best to try). One of the techniques that Tanya, our monitrice, uses with mothers to manage the pain and anxiety of childbirth is self-hypnosis. I didn't invest fully in her whole program, but with my background in spirituality the practice felt to me much like meditation. As the day of the expected delivery grew near, I began to close each day by following one of Tanya's soothing invitations to slow down my breathing, center my attention, and imagine a place of safety and beauty. In the middle of the night in my thirty-ninth week, I awoke with the pain of contraction. The previous day there had been a great snowstorm in Chicago. Through the course of the day, areas around the city experienced five

to eight inches of snowfall. By the time Margaret's arrival seemed imminent and Tanya recommended the move to the hospital, the roads were clear but deserted. The night's dark edge was softened by the glistening white snow lining the streets.

There was no emergency here, but neither was there any delay. Margaret came quickly. My labor was messy and intense. None of this is appropriate for polite conversation, but even the simplest birth is a story of blood and vomit and sweat and shit. That is just the truth. I drew on the support and expertise of the whole team surrounding me. Their care and encouragement wrapped around me emotionally in the same way that the warm blankets soothed me physically. No pharmaceutical intervention was necessary. In a few short hours, Tony and I were holding our new baby girl. The tears of pain were replaced by tears of joy. The doubts about my own strength were replaced with gratitude for the grace of endurance. As one of my mom friends said: "Through childbirth I learned that I was stronger than I thought I was; I learned to trust my body. The most important thing is to have your own experience and pay attention to it."

Margaret arrived in her own way, fully her own person from the very start, already, it seemed, marking out her own place in the family. And here I was

learning all over again what motherhood is and who I was becoming.

Each mother's experience of childbirth is as unique as the child being born. From natural births to cesarean sections to long-awaited phone calls from the adoption agency, premees to induced late-comers, breach to sunny-side-up, each child enters the world in his or her own way with his or her own story. For the mothers of these children as well, no two stories are the same. Each of us has her own tears of joy and pain, her own moments of fear and trust, her own experiences of loneliness and community to share. Yet, for all of us who have given birth, the story of birth is the story of our entrance into motherhood. It is the gateway into a new dimension of identity and into a new community of understanding. And if we make space for it, it is also an opportunity for new spiritual understanding, or perhaps for understanding something quite ancient all over again. For in reflective, prayerful motherhood, we are getting to know not only our children but also ourselves. In childbirth, we are meeting a new child, we are meeting ourselves, and we are meeting God.

NAMING GRACE

One of my friends made the interesting observation that when a new child arrives into our lives, we have

the privilege of naming him or her. There are so many factors at play in selecting a name—family heritage, religious tradition, social convention, joy and delight. Choosing a name can be both great fun and a great responsibility. But what we don't always notice is that at the same time that we are naming the baby, the baby is naming us. This person is the first to call you "Mama." It is this child who will call this identity out of you. It takes your child to draw out—perhaps even to create—this part of you. We are named not only by our parents, but also by our children. And so, through them we meet ourselves anew. They, in all their fragility, uniqueness, and dependence, are active participants in God's creative plan for our lives.

In one way of reading the experience of becoming a mother, the child's development within us and her arrival at birth can be seen as a metaphor for the whole of God's relationship with us. Fr. Timothy Radcliffe, former Master of the Dominican Order, makes this arresting claim in his book *What is the Point of Being a Christian?* "God comes to us as a child comes to a mother, in the depth of her being, through a slow transformation of who she is. Anything else would be violence or a violation...We need patience because God comes to us not as an external agent, but in the very intimacy

of our bodily being, which lives in time.”⁶ Through pregnancy, with childbirth, in the arrival of someone who calls us “Mama,” we are transformed. We are made into someone not entirely new or different but someone more.

The spiritual and autobiographical truth that Radcliffe points out, however, is that although the entrance into motherhood is one of the most obvious transformations of our lives, it is far from the only one. It can make us attentive to the more expansive reality of God’s transformational grace that is always at work within us. How might we read our history differently with this dynamic as our lens? What has the growth and arrival of your new baby been like for you? What potentialities have been called out of you already, even in these opening hours of parenthood?

And then, where before have you experienced a “becoming,” a calling out of “something more” or “something new” from within you? Who else has given you a new name? What did it mean? What did it ask of you? Does the memory of the changes God has already drawn out of you give you courage and wisdom to understand what is being asked of you now?

PRAYER PRACTICE

I was fortunate to grow up in a home with very loving parents who were (and still are) deeply committed to the church. In many ways, I think my parents were exemplars in the kind of education for a life of faith that the church is aiming at when it calls all parents to be the “first heralds” of the mysteries of the faith for their children, and when it declares that “a wholesome family life can foster interior dispositions that are a genuine preparation for a living faith.”⁷ And yet, in some ways, I don’t think I truly learned how to pray on my own, as an adult, outside of the liturgical setting, until I was in graduate theological school. Even years later, I feel indebted to my teacher, Fr. George Murphy, SJ, for giving his students a completely welcoming introduction to several different ways to pray. Since those years, I’ve had many more spiritual teachers who have shown me new paths to God or taken my hand as I walked more deeply down one or another. All the while, they were affirming the very sentiment that Sr. Janet expressed, the ecstatic love of the Trinity, not waiting until we’ve gotten it all right, but there already with a desire even greater than our own for our healing, salvation, and transformation. All of them, in their own ways, were inviting me to “see God in all things and all things

in God,” as the Dominican mystic Meister Eckhart famously said.

So while it is true that God is everywhere and always present to us, it is also true that we need to give ourselves the opportunity to notice, to attend to that holy Presence. While God has been in relationship with us even as we were wondrously knit in our mother’s womb, as human beings we must build relationships in space and in time. There is a great range of ways in which to give structure to that space and time. We are blessed by the wisdom and generosity of our forebearers in faith who not only gave attention to God’s presence in the world, but also left us a record of how they trained their eyes to see and their ears to hear. We are the heirs of millennia of prayer, reflection on prayer, and passing of experience from generation to generation. We are blessed, too, to live in the fertile and creative present where new insight and discovery of the beauty of God’s life with us is emerging all of the time.

Each chapter of this book will close with one method or style of prayer. Some may already be familiar to you. You may already be quite practiced with them and know that they can serve you well as vehicles for recognizing and responding to God’s gracious activity in your life. You may have met them at some early moment in life, under quite different

circumstances. Perhaps they are reentering your life now simply as reminders to draw upon treasures of your past in order to embrace the possibilities of the present. Other suggestions you may be meeting for the first time. Perhaps they will be helpful new avenues by which you might encounter the presence of God at this particular time in life, a time of newness for your baby, certainly, but also for you. In any case, all are offered to you with an open hand.

Many times I have been told that there is no “right” way to pray. There are many fruitful practices that can lead us to greater awareness of the presence of God, and into deeper faithfulness to God’s call to love. God is always waiting to greet us, to delight in us, and to see joy spring up in our hearts, families, and communities. The human family is characterized by great and glorious diversity. We are diverse in culture, color, intellect, humor, physique, health, gender, talent, virtue, vice, and a multitude of other qualities and characteristics. Not surprisingly, then, we are also diverse in the expression and exploration of our spiritual lives. God’s tender care is merciful and intimate. God calls to us not only as a people, but also as persons. How we dispose ourselves to listen to this call will vary greatly. You are invited to take what is helpful, and to leave what distracts. All of these suggestions are given to you

in the same spirit in which they were given to me. They are offered in humility, trust, and hope.

A SIMPLE MEDITATION

I was blessed during my pregnancy and in the birth of our second child to be accompanied through the changes by a monitrice who was trained in hypnosis as well as obstetrics. As part of preparing for a natural birth, in which I hoped to deliver vaginally without the use of any pain management medications, she introduced me to the practice of self-hypnosis. In her practice, this technique is used by mothers to focus their attention and concentrate their energy in order to reduce anxiety and to control the perception of pain associated with both pregnancy and childbirth. Hypnosis is used to train the mind and the body to turn attention away from the discomforts of pregnancy and painful contractions by directing them toward more soothing and relaxing visualizations. The mother or her trusted assistant selects positive encouragements, beautiful scenes, and other exercises meant to acknowledge the discomforts in the body but then minimize their effects by withdrawing the mind's attention from them. The suggestions encourage the mother's belief in her own capacity to manage the pain and even more to lovingly care for her baby.

In learning the technique, I noticed that it was very similar in many ways to various practices of meditation that I'd experienced in my theological education. For some reason this surprised me, but upon further reflection it makes perfect sense. Contemplation of the Incarnation—of the birth of Christ, God made human—teaches us nothing if not that God desires to meet us in the fullness of our humanity. As the angel of the Lord announced to Joseph, “Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel, which means, ‘God is with us’” (Mt 1:23). And John’s gospel proclaims with its own poetic language, “And the Word became flesh and lived among us” (Jn 1:14). The fullness of our humanity encompasses mind, body, and spirit. It should not surprise us, then, that our minds, bodies, and spirits can all be disposed to orient us toward an encounter with the Living God. This is an ancient and global wisdom that has been obscured in the busyness of our contemporary culture. But perhaps the physical extremities of our entrance into motherhood invite us to consider a new practice. Here is an opportunity to slow down, literally take a breath, call ourselves to attention, and experience the wonderment of new life.

Before getting started, recall the words of the psalmist: *“Truly you have formed my inmost being;*

you knit me in my mother's womb. I give you thanks that I am fearfully, wonderfully made." Take this verse into the meditation with you: "I give you thanks that I am fearfully, wonderfully made." You also may wish to set a gentle alarm to free yourself from any concern about keeping time. This will help to free you from any anxiety or disorientation. If you are a beginner, choose just five or seven minutes. As you read, this may feel very short, but if you are unaccustomed to the silence, it will feel like a long time. Be sure that the sound that will bring you out of the meditation is gentle and inviting, not jarring in any way. A single chime works well. If you have more experience with silent prayer, select the time that is best for you, or rely on your body's own memory to bring you out of the prayer when you are ready.

Then, find a comfortable place to sit. Place your feet flat on the floor. Rest your hands on your lap with palms up in a posture of reception, or palms down in stillness and waiting. Be at ease. Straighten your spine and lift your head without stiffening up in any way. Feel your chest opening up to receive the fullness of breath.

Now, notice your breath. Close your eyes and relax your face. Inhale slowly and deliberately. You notice that as you become more comfortable, you begin to breath more naturally, taking a deep breath

that expands your abdomen rather than your upper chest. Exhale through your mouth, pushing the stresses and anxieties out. Your out-breath is a release, a letting go. Take at least ten deep breaths. Feel your body begin to relax.

Then, in your imagination, begin to move down a staircase. As you walk slowly and deliberately down the steps, count each step, backwards from thirty. 30...29...28...as you descend, with each step you become more and more deeply relaxed and at ease. 27...26...25...continue your breathing. 24...23...22...inhale the goodness of the breath of God. 21...20...19...exhale all disturbances and worries...3...2...1.

The bottom of the staircase opens up into a place of safety, warmth, and comfort. Imagine the place where you experience the care and security of God—perhaps a sunlit beach, a green forest, or a special room from your personal history or imagination. Whatever you select, step into this space now. Sit in this sacred surrounding. Recall the wisdom of the psalm, “I give you thanks that I am fearfully, wonderfully made.” Simply be in the divine Presence.

When the chime sounds, repeat the verse one final time and close your prayer. In your imagination, rise from the place of warmth and safety. Know that

you carry it with you, and you can return there whenever you wish. Ascend the staircase slowly and deliberately. When you reach the top, gently open your eyes. You may wish to offer a brief prayer of thanks, in your own words, for whatever gift you received in the meditation. Amen.

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