Rite for the Introduction and Healing of Women after Childbirth

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I will never forget that moment in our church's nursery. Another mom and I were bringing our children in before the Sunday worship service. Chatting about our daily lives as usual, I told her that I was designing a ritual for women after childbirth. She paused, looked me in the eyes, and broke her silence by softly saying: "That's me. That ritual is for me."

It is exactly this kind of heartfelt reaction that has kept me invested in this research. It is this kind of response that prompted me to develop this rite. Such a rite is needed. In our church traditions, women who give birth are either confronted with horribly damaging (and in my opinion, false) theological understandings about sin and purity, or they are made invisible in favor of the wonderful children they have brought into this world.

The ritual presented here reclaims the ancient practice of churching, and transposes it into a rite for women after childbirth. However, it approaches childbirth from a very different theological perspective. The idea of the traditional churching of women is highly associated with purification. In the rite that is developed here, I dismiss the idea that childbirth is related to sin or impurity.

The need for a rite for women after childbirth

Many have studied the rite of "The Thanksgiving of Women after Childbirth," commonly called the "Churching of Women" in the Anglican tradition. From the work of authors such as Theresa Berger, Thelma Aldcroft, Brigitte Enzner-Probst, Natalie Knödel, Cheryl Kristolaitis, Donna E. Ray and Kathryn Wehr, I have concluded that a ritual for women after childbirth needs to address two distinct needs: the need for a rite of passage and the need for a rite of healing.[1]

The idea of the traditional churching of women is highly associated with purification. In the rite that is developed here, I dismiss the idea that childbirth is related to sin or impurity.

As a rite of passage, a ritual for women after childbirth should reintroduce the mother to the community, while keeping her experiences at the center of the ritual. It should also encourage community bonding and formation, which then hopefully leads the community to care for the mother. As a rite of healing, the ritual needs to hold the tension between the ambiguity that goes with childbirth, both the joy and pain of giving birth. This should allow the mother to process her birth experiences emotionally and spiritually. Because this ritual is Christian, it also ought to connect the story of the person who gave birth with the story of Christ. This can be done through the transcultural motive of baptism.[2]

Along with Aldcroft and Enzner-Probst, I want to recognize that men have long dominated the church, and that therefore its symbols and liturgies have denied women's particular experienc-

1. Teresa Berger, *Women's Ways of Worship: Gender Analysis and Liturgical History* (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1999); Thelma Aldcroft, "Childbirth, Liturgy, and Ritual — A Neglected Dimension of Pastoral Theology," in *Life Cycles: Women and Pastoral Care*, Elaine Graham and Margaret Halsey, eds. (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1993): 180–91; Brigitte Enzner-Probst, "Waiting for Delivery: Counseling Pregnant Women as an Issue for the Church," *International Journal of Practical Theology* 8, 2 (November 2004): 185–201, accessed September 20, 2016, http://dx.doi.org/185-201.10.1515/ijpt.2004.8.2.185; Natalie Knödel, "Reconsidering an Obsolete Rite: The Churching of Women and Feminist Liturgical Theology," *Feminist Theology* 5, 14 (January 1997): 106–225, accessed September 21, 2016, http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/096673509700001406; Cheryl Kristolaitis, "From Purification to Celebration: The History of the Service for Women after Childbirth," *Journal of the Canadian Church Historical Society* 28, 2 (October 1986): 53–62, accessed September 21, 2016, ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials; Donna E. Ray, "A View from the Childwife's Pew: The Development of Rites Around Childbirth in the Anglican Communion," *Anglican and Episcopal History* 69, 4 (December 2000): 443–473, accessed September 19, 2016, http://www.jstor.org/stable/42612137; Kathryn Wehr, "Understanding Ritual Purity and Sin in the Churching of Women: From Ontological to Pedagogical to Eschatological," *St Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 55, 1 (2011): 85–105, accessed November 2, 2016, ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials.

2. Lutheran World Federation, "Nairobi Statement On Worship and Culture" (statement from the third international consultation of The Lutheran World Federation's Study Team on Worship and Culture, Nairobi, Kenya, January, 1996), accessed March 15, 2017, http://worship.calvin.edu/resources/resource-library/nairobi-statement-on-worship-and-culture-full-text.

es.[3] In *Under the Tree of Life*, Gail Ramshaw puts it strongly, but quite accurately:

> According to patriarchy, knowledge of God trickles down from God at the top. Women have access to God only through the men, their fathers, husbands, rulers, priests, take your pick. A connection exists between women and God, but there's an exceedingly lengthy distance between them, and not a direct route, for along the way are required stops, the king and the priest and the husband.[4]

This rite, however, breaks through this traditional perspective, by centering the women's experience. The rite also allows the woman herself to speak of God, addressing the whole assembly. She is the one sharing her knowledge and experience.

The shape of the rite

Liturgical practices are always contextual.[5] As Gail Ramshaw writes, one image or symbol can have different meanings for different participants.[6] Therefore, this rite offers a suggestion for liturgical practice, which needs to be adapted to the experiences, story, and narrative of the person and community of those who participate in this rite.[7]

The rite as it has been developed here takes place after the Hymn of the Day. According to *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (ELW), this is where we further proclaim God's word and confess our faith.[8] This is an appropriate location for the rite, since it does exactly that: proclaim God's word and confess the faith, both in the context of childbirth.

After a mother's time of absence due to pregnancy and childbirth, a woman comes back into the congregation quite literally. Allowing her to be part of the procession gives a visual image of how she moves about within the community. She is and always will be a baptized member of the body of Christ. But her role changes, just as her position in and her nearness to or separation from the rest of the assembly. However, we are first and foremost baptized members of the body of Christ, although we take on different roles in our world, such as that of mother. Locating the ritual at the baptismal font is a way in which it can remind us of this baptismal identity. These and other references to baptism are in line with Ramshaw's observation that repetition of an expectable pattern leads to a ritual that can hold ambivalence.[9]

Be mindful of the specific context and identity of both the participating mother and the assembly, without emphasizing or encouraging societal norms regarding motherhood.

Both the person who participates in this rite and the rite itself are introduced to the assembly. In the introduction, the mother and her children are named, along with the birth dates of her children, affirming the mother's central place in the rite. The text of this introduction does not specify with whom we will rejoice and with whom we will mourn. This omission is made in order to recognize the ambivalent feelings present in the whole of the assembly, and not only with the mother. We will rejoice and mourn with each other, all together.

It is important for the ministerial leader to recognize that the word "sister" and the pronouns are female, and that can be changed according to the preference of the person involved. It is also possible that the mother may request that children who were stillborn or have passed away later in life, children who were not carried full term, or other children are named in this introduction. Again, this is a reminder to the ministerial leader to be mindful of the specific context and identity of both the participating mother and the assembly, without emphasizing or encouraging societal norms regarding motherhood.

The rite contains a suggested reading: John 16:20–22. This reading strives to express explicitly the conflicting emotions of childbirth, which is another way in which Ramshaw determines that rituals can hold ambivalence.[10] It might be interesting to consult with the mother on who will be doing the reading. It might be that the mother would like the other parent of the child to do the reading or her partner; or a friend, perhaps someone who was present when she gave birth.

Discussing this rite and the readings gives the ministerial leader an opportunity to accompany the person who gave birth by listening to and talking about the birth story: the joy and pain that might follow birth, questions of meaning, or conversation about personal faith and relationship with God. As such, this might help in identifying possible post-partum depression, depressive symptoms, or other situations that require pastoral or other care.

The rite also includes anointing. This is a symbol of healing that is well known in the Lutheran tradition. But it is also a symbol to honor the body that just gave birth, whether or not it

3. Aldcroft, "Childbirth, Liturgy, and Ritual," 185; Enzner-Probst, "Waiting for Delivery," 185 and 189.
4. Gail Ramshaw, *Under the Tree of Life. The Religion of a Feminist Christian* (New York: Continuum, 1998), 54.
5. Elaine Ramshaw, *Ritual and Pastoral Care* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987).
6. Gail Ramshaw, *Under the Tree of Life*, 41.
7. Jacquelyn Grant, *White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus: Feminist Christology and Womanist Response* (Atlanta, Ga.: Scholars Press, 1989), 10–11; Janet S. Peterman, *Speaking to Silence: New Rites for Christian Worship and Healing* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007). Peterman's work gives interesting inspiration and guidance for those who wish to adapt or create rituals and liturgy.
8. Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, Pew ed. (Minneapolis, Minn.: Augsburg Fortress, 2006), 92.
9. Elaine Ramshaw, *Ritual and Pastoral Care,* 31.
10. Ibid.

has healed medically. This body belongs to God. And it is holy. The ministerial leader may also consider the laying on of hands or extending hands, instead of anointing, because many women have had traumatic experiences in their bodies (related to birth or not). Some may not be prepared to be touched in this way.

The anointing is followed by a paraphrase of Deuteronomy 32:11–12, in which God is portrayed as a caring mother. This image might lead the assembly to recognize the *imago Dei* in the mother. It is also a way in which community and mother can negotiate the mother's changing role and identity, and become more prepared to care for each other.[11]

In *Treasures Old and New: Images in the Lectionary*, Gail Ramshaw discusses the images of milk and honey. The image of the Promised Land as one of milk and honey refers to the abundance of God's gift of grace in Word and Sacrament.[12] She paraphrases the meaning poignantly: "The food that comes from God is as essential to our life as is milk for the infant…"[13] A mother will most likely know how essential milk is for the infant. In offering milk to her as a sign of God's grace, the rite seeks to convey not only the centrality of God's grace in our lives, but also the accessibility of it—and this in the midst of the Christian community. Similarly, the Word of God is often referred to as honey (e.g., Psalm 19, Psalm 119, or the Book of Revelation).

The presiding minister offers milk and honey to the person who just gave birth as a sign of God's abundance, shared through the community of faith. As the assembly extends their hands in blessing, this serves as a means for building up the community, making them aware of the needs of the mother. The accompanying words are a slight adaptation from Deuteronomy 8:7–9, Psalm 138:8, and Psalm 136:1.

Traditionally there are rites and traditions where women literally need to be silent, but as Berger notes, voices are essential to active participation in liturgy and worship.[14] As the mother is metaphorically searching for her new voice,[15] her uttering these age-old words in the midst of the community, together with the community's affirmation, provides a way in which the ritual affirms that about which we can be sure: Gods steadfast and enduring love. This is the case, even within the uncertainty or excitement of (re-)negotiating one's identity as a mother.

This rite contains a prayer from the *ELW* that focuses on how we all have different gifts and vocations. Recognizing that rituals might enforce normalization, this prayer reminds us of the diversity of vocations, avoiding the normative association of womanhood with motherhood.[16] This means that there is an emphasis on how parenting is only one of the many vocations to which we are called as Christians; furthermore, it is a reminder of our baptismal calling. We all have different vocations and different lives. For some it might be that one vocation is indeed motherhood, while for others it lies elsewhere. Even for those who bear children, central vocations might lie outside of the family. Additionally, the phrase "striving to support each other" will encourage a sentiment of belonging and care within the community.

A hymn closes the rite. In this hymn, the assembly proclaims the word of God. This hymn and its imagery will usually be on the theme of vocation and related to the pastoral conversations that have taken place between the ministerial leader and the person who gave birth.

Contextualizing the rite

One should take note that this ritual ought to be adapted to the context in which it will be used. Taking seriously Jacquelyn Grant's critique[17], I want to acknowledge that my own social location, and the social location of the church of which I am part, has determined the way in which this ritual has been shaped. This ritual is clearly designed for the situation of particular women after childbirth, not for all women after childbirth. Rather, it is a template, a starting point, an inspiration. I rely on the pastoral sensitivity of the local ministerial leader to make adaptations, so that also in another context this ritual will be a rite of passage and healing, while fostering community, holding ambiguity, and centering the mother's experience through the theme of baptism.

In contextualizing, I encourage the reader to be mindful of the various meanings that ritual can provoke and enforce within the assembly. The main concept of this rite involves the remembrance of baptism, translated as a reintroduction into the community and for healing. The reader needs to be aware that the symbols should not turn the experience of the person who gave birth into a norm. Willfully or not, rituals are powerful tools for enforcing normalization.[18]

In our current cultural climate, one might be especially mindful of the symbols that might invoke ideas or images of purity and purification, in order to consider what the rite says about womanhood. Both purifying the person who gave birth as well as lifting the birthing person up as an example of purity, are problematic theological concepts. Baptism, on the other hand, is a transcultural element of the Christian faith. This means that any symbol or image of the remembrance of baptism that the worshipping community employs is well suited for contextualizing this rite after childbirth.

The reproducible rite which follows can be printed equally successfully in color or black only.

11. Ibid., 42.
12. Gail Ramshaw, *Treasures Old and New: Images in the Lectionary* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 2002), 183.
13. Ibid., 188.
14. Teresa Berger, *Gender Differences and the Making of Liturgical History: Lifting a Veil on Liturgy's Past* (Farnham, Surrey: Routledge, 2011), 162.
15. Herbert Anderson and Edward Foley, *Mighty Stories, Dangerous Rituals. Weaving Together the Human and the Divine* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998), 62.
16. Elaine Ramshaw, *Ritual and Pastoral Care*, 42, 49.
17. Jacquelyn Grant, *White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus*, 199–201.
18. Elaine Ramshaw, *Ritual and Pastoral Care,* 42, 49.

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This ritual can follow the Hymn of the Day. The person who gave birth may be included in the procession into the congregation.

INVITATION

The assembly is seated.

The presiding minister invites the person who gave birth to the font.

INTRODUCTION

At the font, the presiding minister addresses the assembly with these or similar words.

Our sister in Christ, name, has given birth on date, becoming the mother of name. We will now rejoice at the joy, and weep and mourn for the pain that comes with a birth, by reading from scripture and by anointing, by offering milk and honey as a sign of God's abundant love and by praying together.

READING

If necessary or appropriate, another reading can be used.

A reading from the Gospel of John

"Very truly, I tell you, you will weep and mourn, but the world will rejoice; you will have pain, but your pain will turn into joy. When a woman is in labor, she has pain, because her hour has come. But when her child is born, she no longer remembers the anguish because of the joy of having brought a human being into the world. So you have pain now; but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you."

Word of God, Word of Life. **Thanks be to God.**

LAYING ON OF HANDS

The presiding minister lays both hands on the person's head and/or anoints the person's forehead with oil, making the sign of the cross, saying

You belong to Christ, in whom you have been baptized.

The Lord is with you and guides you, as an eagle that stirs up its nest, and hovers over its young; as it spreads its wings, takes them up, and bears them aloft on its pinions.

Amen.

A moment of silence for reflection may follow the reading.

SHARING OF MILK AND HONEY

The presiding minister offers milk and honey to the mother, as a sign of Gods abundant grace and the promise of the life to come.

The minister invites the congregation to extend their hands in blessing, while the congregation (or a representative of the congregation) says the following:

The Lord your God is bringing you into a good land—a land with brooks, streams, and deep springs gushing out into the valleys and hills; a land with wheat and barley, vines and fig trees, pomegranates, olive oil and honey; a land where bread will not be scarce and you will lack nothing; a land where the rocks are iron and you can dig copper out of the hills.

At the same time as the minister offers the milk and honey, the mother may drink and eat.

After partaking in the milk and honey, the mother responds with:

The Lord will vindicate me; your love, Lord, endures forever—you will not abandon the works of your hands.

To this all respond:

We give thanks to the Lord our God, for God is good. God's love endures forever.

Alternatively, this or another acclamation or hymn may be sung.

Stand

PRAYER

The assisting minister invites the assembly to join in the prayer for guidance and vocation (ELW p.86).

Listening for God's call, and striving to support each other in our various ministries and vocations, let us pray.

Direct us, Lord God, in all our doings with your most gracious favor, and extend to us your continual help; that in all our works begun, continued, and ended in you, we may glorify your holy name; and finally, by your mercy, bring us to everlasting life; through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord.

Amen.

An acclamation or a hymn on the theme of vocation may be sung. During the hymn, all return to their places.

The service may then continue with the creed or the prayers of intercession.