



## Malabarriga

Text: Romans 8:18-27

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The cover of the April 8, 1966 edition of [Time](#) announced the death of God. From *Time* magazine to Seminary campuses, as Vietnam dominated the nightly news and fire hoses blasted marchers in Selma, there was a relentless chorus that God is dead and that any hope to change a broken and decaying world rests with us. The movement drew its inspiration from the German philosopher, Friederich Nietzsche, who in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century pronounced, “God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him” (*The Gay Science*, section 125).

Sometime and somehow, almost inexplicably, God has made a comeback in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Pollsters tell us that God is very much alive in the American public, and now it is not God, but the church, that is dead. The vocation of those of us called as pastors, educators, church musicians, ruling elders, and deacons is to give the church a decent funeral. The mantra of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is “Spiritual But Not Religious.” After all, if you have your own individual God, who needs the church?

Sociologists love to describe the dying or dead church. They tell us how churches are closing at rapid rates – Protestant, Catholic, and Evangelical, and how a vast majority of people are staying home on Sundays, even in the Bible belt. Take a trip to most major cities in Europe and increasingly within the U.S. and you will find some of the best hotels and finest restaurants now situated in former church buildings. Talk to most Seminary Presidents and they will tell you that fewer folks are applying to Seminary. Of course, applications are down. Why apply to serve a church that is dead, or in the most optimistic circles, on life support? Why fly red banners and sing songs of the Spirit on Pentecost today when we should be wearing black and singing songs of lament?

Now, it is true that there are some things that need to die in the church, from some of its arcane and mean theology to its frequent lock step with prejudice and racism in the name of Jesus to its repeated obsession with matters that matter little. It is not without a wealth of irony

that I am preaching in a church today, when, in reality, we all have been told that the church is dead.

Before you and I are tempted to join the prevailing chorus of death, remember we have just come out of the long liturgical stretch called Easter. If Easter means something more than tasty chocolate bunnies and an annual dose of false hope for desperate preachers of booming crowds, it means that God has the last word when it comes to who and what is to be pronounced “dead” in the world. If the Pentecost story in Acts is clear about anything, it is clear that God brings to life some pretty dead or frightened individuals and communities.

In Romans 8, Paul suggests that any death call for God or for the church of Jesus, God’s beloved child, is radically premature. Paul offers us, instead, a much more evocative image for our theology, a markedly female image, but one that many males have witnessed close up.

It is the image of “labor pains” and Paul uses that image for both creation and for Christians. Paul tells the Romans that God is bringing something to birth in the Christian community and the world and it will not happen without excruciating consequence.

Lutheran pastor, Heidi Neumark, uses the Spanish term, *Malabarriga* to describe the term Paul uses in Romans 8. Paul says, “We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now.” Heidi says, “In both pregnancies, I suffered a bad case of what the Puerto Rican mothers in the church call ‘malabarriga’, which translates as ‘evil belly’, and seems more to the point than the comparatively benign English equivalent.”

At the time of her two pregnancies, Heidi was pastor of the Transfiguration Lutheran Church in the Bronx, a church that when she arrived looked much like one of the many dead or dying churches pictures on the cover of the bulletin. There was nothing “transfiguring” about this embattled congregation. It was dying and had Heidi accepted what was apparent she would have pronounced the last rites and given the church a good funeral.

Instead, Heidi believed that the Transfiguration Lutheran Church was hardly dying, but instead, suffering from a wicked case of *malabarriga*. In her marvelous book, *Breathing Space*, Heidi tells the story of what God gave birth to in that congregation in the face of so much death and dying. Writing about morning sickness in her pregnancy and the new life awaiting the people of her church, Heidi writes, “The doctor happily assured me that my belly was not cursed at all. On the contrary, the prodigious hormone level was a healthy sign of strong new life taking hold. This ‘malabarriga’ was a sign of blessing” (*Breathing Space*, p. 13).

Heidi refused to see the church as dying. Neither do I. She refused to be a prophetess of doom. Nor will I. So, at this time, I would like for the ushers to pass out replacement bulletin covers. Before you get the new bulletin cover, take one hard look at the images of the dying church that you have been holding. It is a depressing sight.

Now, look at the new bulletin cover. Notice that it does not portray dying structures. It portrays faces, images of the living church, a church, admittedly that sometimes suffers from a fierce case of *malabarriga*, but nonetheless, a church that God is bringing to birth despite all narratives to the contrary. Some pictures on the new cover you will recognize immediately, but some require a bit of explanation. Allow me.

Pope Francis, like Paul, like Heidi, is someone who never underestimates what God is bringing to pass in a broken, despairing world and church, despite terrible and painful

resistance. Tell Francis that “the church is dead” and he will give you one of those impish smiles of someone who knows more than all the great prognosticators combined, who recognizes *malabarriga* when he sees it, and then kneels down to wash a Muslim’s feet on Holy Thursday. He gives daily witness to Christians of all stripes of the church that God is bringing to birth, often with a loud, birthing cry.

The picture of people of all ages and colors and denominations kneeling in prayer is from the Taize Community in France. Three times a day, every day of the year, people gather together in sung and silent prayer. They do not see prayer as the last ditch effort of Christians when all else has failed, but as the beginning of being quiet long enough to listen for the birth cries of the people of God. In the oftentimes, *malabarriga* type prayers of the Taize community, Christians align themselves with Paul’s profound words: “Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words.” Prayers of the church God is bringing to birth propel us into the world God so loves, as agents of God’s grace and mercy, advocacy and justice.

Zoom in a bit on the new bulletin cover and you will see Columbia Theological Seminary students for whom the prevailing narrative, “the church is dead” has been drilled into their heads. These students choose to believe otherwise, choose to believe that our Easter God is doing something new, something extraordinary, choose to believe that the Pentecost Spirit is busy bringing the church to new life. Students are at Seminary not to train as hospice chaplains for a church on life-support, but as labor and delivery nurses for a church God is bringing to birth.

One picture familiar to many but not all of you is that of Katie Bashor. Katie and her husband, Mark, have been the moving forces behind the Central Night Shelter for the past 36 years. I included Katie’s photo as a tribute to someone who the Apostle Paul would have never needed to convince about what God is bringing to birth. Katie knew that God does not intend for God’s creatures to have no safe shelter and to be subject to the whims of the weather and victims of political leaders who have no use for the poor. She also knew that until God’s great birthing project is complete that she was going to exercise radical hospitality and would not be a part of any church that decided that for financial, security, or convenience sake there is no room in the inn.

The most recent pictures are from the dedication of a church in the village of Trou Jacques in the mountains of the island of La Gonave, off the coast of Haiti. Dedicated to the memory of Margaret and Howard Montgomery, two of the most outrageously generous and welcoming people I have ever known, this church is the new locus for worship and learning, job training and community building in one of the poorest and most forgotten locales of the world. Ask Monsieur Bellegarde, the leader of the village, if the church is dead, he will give you a hearty laugh and point to the new church filled to overflowing with children and youth and adults of every age and he will tell you, “A first world fantasy.”

What pictures would you add to change the narrative that too many in our society and way too many in the church have reached that “the church is dead”? What pictures would you paste onto the new bulletin cover that gives powerful witness of the Risen Christ and the

Moving Spirit pushing beyond all the current harbingers of hate and prognosticators of death to usher in a reign of justice and peace that will not decay with time?

“God is dead.” “The church is dead.” Paul has no patience with such theological nonsense and if we look beyond the images of the old bulletin cover, neither will we. The church may be suffering an especially bad case of *malabarriga*, but from this suffering and struggling and transition, God is bringing a new and transformed church to birth.

Feel free to take the old bulletin cover home with you, but the new bulletin cover is the one to paste to your refrigerator door and hold close to your heart. The new bulletin cover is a visual testimony of what Paul shared with the Romans when he declared: “I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the joy about to be revealed to us.”

The church is dead! Not a chance. Not even close!

Thanks be to God!

AMEN