When I was in Grade 7, I had a friend named Nina (as I will call her here), a lovely Métis girl. She “passed” for white, which is why she had no problems in my very, very, very white school. One day, after Nina and I had been friends for a while, she took me home after school, where I was greeted by her Cree mother. They didn’t warn me. They thought it would be funny. And it apparently was, because they both howled with laughter at my obvious shock. Once I got over it, and I’m not sure it was even the same day, I said something stupid about Nina obviously having a white father, and her mother, who pulled no punches, said, “Yeah, they were white.” I must have looked confused, because she then told me that two young white guys had raped her, and the result was Nina. I was horrified and on the verge of tears. That’s when she got really gentle and said, “It’s okay honey. I made peace with it. And I chose to have her. I figured some good should come of it all. I didn’t have to do that. It’d be different if they made me.” Then she looked a bit haunted and said, “Like my sister.”
And there’s the heart of the issue: choice. Women get pregnant in all sorts of ways: expected, unexpected, carefully planned, in vitro fertilization, and rape. I don’t think rape is on the top of anyone’s list of fun ways to get pregnant. It’s a crime; it’s a trauma that people live with for the rest of their lives. And sometimes it results in pregnancy. At that point, like every pregnant woman, the woman has a choice to make: Do I want to carry this to term? Do I want a baby now? Do I want to abort? Do I want to give it up for adoption?

I’d hazard a guess that most women who get pregnant by a rapist don’t want to carry the pregnancy to term. They don’t want a physical reminder of the violation. They don’t want to worry that they’ll look into their baby’s eyes and see their rapist. They don’t want to worry that nature will outsmart nurture and that their baby will grow up to be a rapist. And so they choose to stop it.

And some women choose to go on with it. Perhaps, like my friend’s mom, they view a new life as something wonderful coming from a trauma (I might have named that girl Phoenix!), or perhaps they don’t have access to a safe abortion and won’t risk a back alley job or perhaps they are anti-choice themselves. Or maybe they decide to give it up for adoption. I can’t fathom this one myself—carrying a pregnancy from rape to term and then giving up the baby? It boggles my mind. But that’s the point. I don’t have to be the one to understand it. Only the woman making the decision does.

But they’re all valid choices. And they should all be supported. Can we please stop mocking the idea that some women might actually want a pregnancy that we couldn’t conceive of? I understand the impulse to mock. We tend to mock those whose beliefs are so different from ours that we can’t even imagine how the thought process works. This is especially true when there is fear involved. When I was pregnant with my second child, a woman in my pregnancy group was carrying a baby who was conceived by rape. She had decided to keep the baby, but she actually had to fight with her family (read: parents), who tried to get her to abort, because they had all the fears listed above. And they were afraid that she wouldn’t be able to love her baby. They were probably afraid that they wouldn’t love the baby. They wanted to protect her. But she said the same thing my old girlfriend’s mom said: “I wanted something good to come of it. And what could be better than a new baby?” (My thoughts were wine, chocolate, a hot bath, and some bubblewrap therapy, but to each her own.) And so she decided to carry on.
In 2012, an American politician, Richard Mourdock, found himself in the media spotlight when he tried to defend his objection to a rape exclusion to an abortion ban. His argument, if you can call it that, was that a pregnancy from rape is “something that God intended to happen.” I understand his logic, actually. He believes that God creates all life and that life begins at conception. So he says it’s God’s will. Not the rape, but the pregnancy that came from it. I’m not sure how one can separate them, but maybe he thinks God is micromanaging the sperm. Or that God is some sort of weird doorman at the egg barrier. I have no clue, and Murdoch isn’t saying, probably because he doesn’t know either. In “Pregnancy from Rape Is Not ‘God’s Will’,” an article that appeared in the *Washington Post* on 24 October 2012, Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite, a former professor at the Chicago Theological Seminary, disagrees with him on all of it. She says that making God the author of conception after rape makes God the author of the crime as well. Where I disagree with her is in her statement that “conception following rape is a tragedy, not part of ‘God’s will.’” I say that tragedy is defined by the victim of the crime. It is a tragedy if the woman perceives it as one. Like rain is a tragedy in a flood but a blessing in a drought, a conception from a rape is what the woman perceives it to be in her particular circumstances.

Actually, that’s where the religious anti-choice people make the least sense. They claim that all conceptions are gifts and blessings, and we just need to shut up and see it that way. Oh, I suppose that’s possible. Any belief is changeable. It’s like saying that rain is always a blessing, a gift from God. Just get in a boat and enjoy it. Swept away in a flood? Intended by God. Crops failing? God’s will. Can’t eat this winter? God must be teaching you a lesson. Conception is just something that happens. We define its value. But that’s the problem too. Anti-choice Christians have made their beliefs into dogma, incontrovertible truth, and are attempting to enforce it as law on all of us. They want to be the ones defining the belief for everyone.

And where do the Christian anti-choice people get the idea that a fetus is a blessing, each and every time? Where do they get the idea that the life growing inside a pregnant woman is a full person? I’m Christian, with thirteen years of Catholic school, so I know my Bible pretty well, but I had to go looking for explicit references. I could not find a single reference to “abortion,” “caused herself to miscarry,” or any variation of those. Even “unborn” got me only a single reference, and it was to “a people yet unborn.” But there
are plenty of references to babies in wombs and pregnant women—here are some of them.

Psalm 139:13
For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother’s womb.

Lovely image, that. Of course, we know that’s not quite right, but it is a lovely image. The Bible is full of lovely imagery. And some not-so-lovely imagery . . . see below.

Isaiah 44:2
This is what the LORD says—he who made you, who formed you in the womb, and who will help you: Do not be afraid, Jacob, my servant, Jeshurun, whom I have chosen.

Same idea, God actively forming the fetus.

Jeremiah 1:5
Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations.

Jeremiah 20:17
For he did not kill me in the womb, with my mother as my grave, her womb enlarged forever.

Okay, Jeremiah definitely feels like he was an individual in the womb, and that in the womb, he could be killed. And God said he knew him in the womb. Okay, I am definitely on board with the idea that this is an argument for the fetus being a separate entity from its mother. But so what? Does that mean that his mother, or any mother, is morally obliged (never mind legally obliged) to allow it to continue to develop? At that time in history, certainly. Because the fetus belonged to her husband. (Many a woman, though, found a way to abort; it seems that if that had been a big deal, they’d have mentioned it.) But today? No. Not for a woman who isn’t Christian, certainly. And for Christians? I think that’s between them and God, because there’s nothing in here that is completely clear.

Luke 1:44
As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy.

Oh boy. A fetus with emotions. Or maybe he just decided to kick. Mine liked to do that when I ate spicy food. Joy? A pretty image again, but I see
no evidence of anything other than wishful thinking. Interestingly, this is the only reference in the Greek scriptures bestowing any sort of awareness upon a fetus.

Amos 1:13–14
This is what the Lord says: “For three sins of Ammon, even for four, I will not relent. Because he ripped open the pregnant women of Gilead in order to extend his borders, I will set fire to the walls of Rabbah that will consume her fortresses amid war cries on the day of battle, amid violent winds on a stormy day.”

There’s a fair bit about the crime of ripping open pregnant women in the Hebrew scriptures (a.k.a. the Old Testament)—in Hosea and 2 Kings, especially. Looks like this was a worse offence than just killing the women or the children because pregnant women were property carrying other property. Children, in utero or not, were property of their fathers, and women, property of their husbands. So pregnant women were especially valuable. And I’m sure there was plenty of emotional value involved, too. These people, like people everywhere, had hopes and dreams for the future. To have them so cruelly taken away could drive almost anyone to revenge.

Genesis 38:24
About three months later Judah was told, “Your daughter-in-law Tamar is guilty of prostitution, and as a result she is now pregnant.” Judah said, “Bring her out and have her burned to death!”

Well then. Nice guy. I guess that fetus was worthless. It certainly didn’t seem to have any value to Judah at all. And when a fetus does have value in the Bible, well, we’re back to property value. Since the fetus’s owner could not be determined, it had no value at all.

Exodus 21:22–23
If people are fighting and hit a pregnant woman and she gives birth prematurely but there is no serious injury, the offender must be fined whatever the woman’s husband demands and the court allows. But if there is serious injury, you are to take life for life.

“Gives birth prematurely” means miscarriage, since in those times, preemies didn’t have a chance. (The King James Version reads “and her fruit depart from her”; the Good News Bible says “and loses the child.”) There are lots of laws set out in Exodus about what could be done to slaves, children,
people who curse their parents. And this one is right smack in the middle of them. It is absolutely clear in this passage that fetuses were not to be considered of equal value to women. Killing a woman (accidentally, that is—go ahead and beat her to death if she cheated on you) was punishable by death. Killing a fetus, but not the woman, was punishable by fine. This is a clear reference to the value of a fetus being less than that of a wife.

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It might appear that this is another example of the Bible contradicting itself, but assuming you take everything in the Bible to be golden and completely relevant today, what all of this says is that God forms life in women’s wombs, little lives, capable of experiencing joy. And that these lives are just not as valuable as fully formed ones. They’re valuable, certainly, as the property of men. God never really says anything about their inherent value as souls—oh sure, God had plans for some of those fetuses, and God’s plans can’t be thwarted by mere women with inconvenient pregnancies. Maybe that’s why God bothered to send angels to Mary and some of the other women who found themselves inconveniently pregnant. So they wouldn’t find a good herbalist.

But perhaps, like me and many other Progressive Christians, you view the Bible as a holy, sacred book of stories of our ancestors in faith and how they understood God, a divine set of moral stories, history, and mythology to learn from, not as a revelation of God’s Law, enshrined on paper, divinely translated and transcribed perfectly for all eternity. So no, I don’t think that Exodus’s law about killing a fetus really proves what God thinks (because I’m pretty positive God doesn’t want us keeping slaves and beating them—same book, same chapter), but it does show clearly that the people of the day didn’t value fetuses like the anti-choice crowd now does, and claim that God does (using scripture as backup). They’re the first to jump on the likes of me for cherry-picking quotes, but they’re leaving out a pretty damning one themselves.

We pray “Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven,” so I’m pretty sure God would really like our world to be such that no woman ever felt the need to abort, and that we are fucking it up royally. My God values human life: fetal life, child life, adult life, elderly life. But my God is not an idiot. God knows that women will choose abortion, for all sorts of reasons, some good, some
terrible (for God to judge though, not me!). And God will want them to be safe about it, because God loves them and would rather lose one precious life than two. And so I am vehemently pro-choice, because abortion restrictions do not prevent abortions. They push them underground, and instead of one life lost, there are sometimes two.

And that’s what the anti-choicers miss. They’re so concerned about the “right” of the fetus to live (I disagree with that too, but on different grounds) that they forget to care about the mother. They say horrible things like “If a woman doesn’t want to die of an illegal abortion, she shouldn’t have one,” which can be translated as “You get what you deserve, slut.” They don’t care that there are situations where the choice to abort is better than to carry to term—an abusive marriage, the precarious mental or physical health of the mother, the needs of existing children, just for starters. They live in a world of black and white, right and wrong. And that’s just simply not reality.

We live in a world where there’s wrong and more wrong. Right and more right. Where children starve if Mom can’t work, and Mom can’t work if she’s on bed rest. Where husbands beat women for being pregnant, even when they’re the ones who got them that way. Where fragile minds would break down if the body had to carry a fetus to term. Where crappy Dads beat the shit out of kids, so maybe it’s a bad idea to give them more victims. Where nine-year-olds, whose bodies aren’t ready to have babies, are impregnated by their stepfathers.

And NONE of that shit is God’s plan. That’s us fucking up God’s plan. So we can make it worse by limiting women’s options, driving them into situations in which they’re willing to risk death to end a pregnancy, and blaming them for their predicament, or we can create a world where every pregnancy is a wanted pregnancy. Where every child is cherished. You tell me, just how could God not want that?

I’m still not sure how I feel about the idea that God creates all life. What I think might be true is that God created life and that we propagate it—similar to how I planted the mint in my backyard, and it’s spreading. Not by my will, but not against it either. Not that I’m God—it’s not a perfect analogy, but something along those lines. We have free will, so we can choose to reproduce or not. I don’t believe in predestination or in God as the ultimate puppeteer. I believe that God is with us—nudging us through various means, including conscience, to do the right thing—and we do what we’ll do. Sometimes that’s what God wants, sometimes it’s not. So when a man
rapes a woman and God is there, begging him not to, and he does it anyway, it’s not God’s will that she is impregnated. It just happens. And whether that pregnancy is a tragedy or not is up to her. There will be no judgments from me, because I don’t have her experience. I don’t have her life. I don’t have her beliefs. I don’t have her conscience. I don’t have her knowledge. We need to trust women to do what is right for them (us) and shut our mouths about it.

The very last bit of Thistlethwaite’s Washington Post article really struck me, so I’ll end with it, too:

There is, however, no failure of compassion so glaring as the way rape survivors are being made into political and religious scapegoats today.

Stop that. In God’s name, stop it.

Note