

Advent Wisdom: Creating Strength and Beauty

Fourth Sunday in Advent

December 24, 2017

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Texts: 2 Samuel 7.1-11, 16;
Psalm 89. 1-4, 19-26;
Romans 16.25-27;
Luke 1.26-38

Throughout these last weeks we have been looking for Advent wisdom as our texts point us toward creation. Elements in the natural world that speak to us of the strength and beauty of God can guide us and ground us in tumultuous times. We have looked to the wisdom of fig trees, feathers, and shoots that grow up from lifeless stumps.

Today we turn from the elemental to the relational which seems right to this time of year. Gatherings around the church in December take a decidedly different turn; not so much committee work and discernment as parties and celebrations. Most of the invitations I anticipate as they are part of the annual traditions around here of youth group, Brim Bunch and Circle gatherings. One took me by surprise and that was the invitation to Men's breakfast this past Wednesday morning. I was invited because they were looking at a piece in the book they were reading about the Virgin Birth and they wanted a woman's perspective. Now I knew that I had no unique perspective as a woman per se. I trusted what I had to say could be potentially the same a number of the men around the table. But I was eager to go because I saw it as an opportunity to hang with some pretty cool men in our church who I don't get to sit and discuss theology with very often. We covered a lot of ground as I hear often happens Men's Breakfast: how this doctrine was important theologically to Roman Catholics for very different reasons than it was to Protestants or how it became a litmus test in the early 20th century battles between liberal and fundamentalist theologies. We reminded ourselves that Matthew wanted to make a clear connection to the prophecy of Isaiah that speaks of the birth of the Messiah as coming from a virgin; a word in Hebrew that can simply mean young maiden. And I confessed that for me what makes this story of Mary so

interesting has nothing to do with the question of how Jesus was or was not conceived.

What's so powerful in this story before us today is the opportunity to ask "What does it look like for any of us to be responsive and faithful as God seeks to enter the world?" That's the interesting question from my perspective. That's what seems to interest Luke as he gives to us not just one but two annunciation stories in his opening to the gospel. Zechariah is the first when an angel announces that in their old age he and Elizabeth will bear a son, John, who will be the forerunner for the Messiah of God. Zechariah is the foil to Mary of what it looks to be responsive to divine initiative looking for an entry and opening into human life. On the surface the contrast seems unfair. As you read it off the page Zechariah's question looks very similar to Mary's. But as every parent has told their children it's not just the words you use it's the tone that matters. Given the way the angel responds, I hear in Zechariah's question a defiant tone and a demand for proof when he barks at the angel "How will I know that this is so? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years." It's the kind of question meant to belittle the one who poses such an outrageous claim.

By contrast I hear in Mary's question a tone of wonder and awe perhaps born more of curiosity more than demand: "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" And sure enough the passage ends with Mary as the model of discipleship offering the response of faith that Luke will hold out as THE RESPONSE God is looking for from us: "Here I am, the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word."

Luke gives to us these contrasting responses because this is the tension and the challenge of discipleship: what will we do with the messages of God? Especially when they offend our sensibilities or push us beyond what we think we can offer or ask of us the impossible. How do we know that it is in fact a message from God at all? That is what Zechariah and Mary had to grapple with in these visions of angels. And as I said two weeks ago few of us have visions like these and as it turns out having a vision of an angel doesn't necessarily make the discernment any easier. Just ask Zechariah!

I heard two pieces in the last two weeks that bring into sharper clarity where the challenge of this text might show up for us. It started in the Circle 4 Christmas gathering. As a group they have been studying the book of Hebrews this year. For their Christmas gathering they looked at the meaning of angels in the scriptures and read a piece from the book of Hebrews on the subject: "Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it."¹ That was the first piece: that the message of God shows up through strangers that we meet. And not just people who are strangers to us but ideas that are strange to us.

Then there was a piece by Joan Chittister, read in our staff devotions this past Monday. These pieces together brought this question into a much sharper focus of how to be responsive to God who may be coming to us in ways that we do not at first see or perhaps even welcome. Joan Chittister was talking about being present at a conference in Washington DC on the relationship of the faith community to race relations in the United States. She talked about the diversity of those gathered coming from different races and religions and perspectives. She spoke about a Native American chief who shared something very simple that for her clarified the teaching of Isaiah to "make straight the way of God." The chief simply said: "I have spent my lifetime teaching our children to say 'thank you': Thank you to the grass. Thank you to the rain. Thank you to the stranger. Thank you for all the people of the world. I think that if we learn to say 'thank you' for everything, we will come to realize its value, to respect it, to see it as sacred."

Here's the place where Joan Chittister's reflections on that speech brought this question of how to be responsive to God into sharp focus (when she wrote): "Christmas is the commitment to life incarnate. It is the call to see God everywhere and especially in those places we would not expect to find glory or grace....Christmas is the obligation to see that everything leads us directly to God, to realize that there is no one, nothing on earth that is not the way to God for me."

¹ Hebrews 13.1-2, NRSV

We receive not just the message of God but we encounter God in the relational web of life. And not just the ones we run to for support as Mary does with Elizabeth in our text for today but also in the hard relationships with the ones who offend us and are as strangers to us and whose ideas and demands we cannot fathom. What Mary exhibits that Zechariah does not is essentially an open mind and a receptive spirit; who when confronted with the impossible or offensive gets curious not defiant. It is that curious, open, receptive spirit we are invited to cultivate as we turn now to the celebration of Christmas.

I wanted to close our reflection this morning with a meditation that Lorilyn Wiering who runs the Red Cord Community sent out this week by email.² It's a piece written by St. John of the Cross, a Spanish mystic from the 16th century. It's a piece that invites us into a spirit of openness and receptivity and utilizes the imagery from these passages we have read in Luke today. I invite you to close your eyes and to listen and then sit in some silence as our prayer for meditation today.

If
you want
the Virgin will come walking down the road
pregnant with the holy,
and say,
"I need shelter for the night, please take me inside your heart,
my time is so close."

Then, under the roof of your soul, you will witness the sublime
intimacy, the divine, the Christ
taking birth
forever,

as she grasps your hand for help, for each of us
is the midwife of God, each of us.

² You can learn more about the Red Cord Community or sign up to receive Lorilyn's email at <http://redcordcommunity.org/>

Yet there, under the dome of your being does creation
come into existence eternally, through your womb, dear pilgrim –
the sacred womb in your soul,

as God grasps our arms for help; for each of us is
His beloved servant
never far.

If you want, the Virgin will come walking
down the street pregnant
with Light and sing ...³

³ St. John of the Cross, "If You Want" in Daniel Ladinsky *Love Poems from God: Twelve Sacred Voices from the East and West* (New York: Penguin Group, 2002), 306-307.