

Dec. 24, 2006 Morning

Luke 1:39-56

By Rev. Aaron Fulp-Eickstaedt

“Elizabeth’s Question”

Our text for this morning begins with a young, unmarried pregnant woman getting out of her hometown as quickly as she possibly can. We know, as Mary’s fiancé and the people in her village do not, at least not yet, that God is going to accomplish something special through her pregnancy. So before anybody sees her showing, Mary sets out and goes with haste to a town in the Judean hill country, the town where her much older cousin Elizabeth lives. Elizabeth is pregnant, too, and when Mary comes through the door and greets her, the baby in the older woman’s womb, John, leaps for joy. That’s when the text says that the Holy Spirit overtakes Elizabeth. She pronounces a blessing on Mary and her child, and she asks a question,

“Why has this happened to me?”

“Why has this happened to me that the mother of our Lord should come to me?”

This morning, I want to suggest that “why has this happened to me?” is a profoundly spiritual question to ask. It’s a great Advent question. It’s a question worth having in the forefront of our minds as we move through the events of a day, or look back on them in the evening. Those words are worth scrawling on the top of every page of a daily journal because they are words that help us make meaning of our lives.

Having said that, we must also say that there are many times when the answer to that question is not readily apparent. The doctor calls us into her office to share news we never wanted or expected to hear. The spouse decides after too many years that he no longer wants to be married. A son or daughter calls from jail. An error in judgment comes back to haunt us. A business venture fails spectacularly. And we are tempted to cry out, “Why me?” which means, “Why me and not someone else? Or more precisely, “What have I done to deserve this?”

This kind of “why me?” is a wholly justified cry of pain. Let me hasten to add, that, at least in my experience, the answer to “what have I done to deserve this?” is often “Nothing. You have done nothing to deserve this.” A “why me?” in a situation like that is an acknowledgement that life is not fair, and that far too often there seems no real rhyme or reason as to why one family gets beset with tragedy and loss while another gets off relatively scot-free. When a parent watches a young girl die before she becomes a teenager, or a woman who would be a great mother never carries a pregnancy to term, or mental illness or serious injury wreaks havoc in a person’s or a family’s life, it is natural to cry, “why me?”

Thankfully, most events in our lives don’t occasion that kind of anguished query. “Why has this happened to me?” can be asked in non-crisis situations, too.

Whether we ask it in situations of great crisis, or of a seemingly ordinary encounter in a fairly typical day, we cannot forget something important about Elizabeth’s question.

Her question does not stop with the words why has this happened to me, it is accompanied by a recognition that, in some way, the encounter she is having with Mary is pregnant (or that Mary is pregnant, with possibility and by a perception that the saving power of God might be coming into the world through her.

This Advent, we tried a little something different in our family. Rather than reading from an Advent devotional book, whenever we were able to be together for our evening meal, I asked everyone around the table, "Where did you see Christ coming into the world today?" It was a question intended to help each of us Fulp-Eickstaedts to reflect theologically on the events of the day. To consider that something that perhaps seemed relatively insignificant at the time might have been evidence of the advent of incarnate love. To see in the ordinary evidence of the holy.

Why did my friend from upstate New York call me on Tuesday, quite out of the blue, to ask me how I was doing? Why did the transient looking for assistance appear right when I was in the middle of my Disciple reading? Why did you have the urge to contact a friend at just that moment? Why did God put this person who gets on your very last nerve in your life?

Why did Mary show up at Elizabeth's doorstep? Maybe Mary was scared and needed some reassurance, some sense that she was not alone, that someone else could relate to having an unexpected pregnancy. Maybe she just needed someone to be "a safe space" for her for a while. Maybe Elizabeth needed reassurance herself. Maybe each of them needed confirmation that the life growing in them was a gift.

Sometimes Marys come into our lives, and what we need to do is to reaffirm for them that their lives are pregnant with possibility. They are in our lives for a time, and we sit beside them as the gifts in them grow. Sitting beside them, encouraging them, we help them understand that, just like the first Mary, they carry the image of God within them and they can bear God into the world.

You who work with our Dreamers, you know exactly what I mean. It can be frustrating at times, and sometimes you wonder if you're making any progress at all. But it's oh so rewarding when you see a child at risk blossom and grow. When you help a person to see their inherent worth and to begin to develop and claim and use their gifts, isn't that a kick? You who are teachers know this, too, whether you teach preschoolers or college students or somewhere in between.

One of the great joys of being a pastor is to see people flower and grow in this way. I will never forget a young man I came to know in a previous church. He'd suffered some pretty severe psychological and emotional setbacks, and as a result, had dropped out of college. When I arrived at my former church, he was perhaps at his lowest point. On one of his better days, we had lunch. As time went on, we made more connections. I officiated at his sister's wedding and his grandfather's funeral. We had more lunches. He started coming to worship and to the Sunday morning Bible study class I led. I, and a number of others, were his Elizabeths, giving him a safe space and encouraging him - we recognized and affirmed the gifts in him, the image of God in him, the way he could bear God into the world. Now he regularly visits shut-ins, and teaches the class that I used to lead.

Yesterday, out of the blue, someone sent me a poem/prayer that this young man wrote.

*Dearest Heavenly Father,
Please grant me the wisdom to live out my days,
seeking Your Perfect Will, not serving my own faulty ways.*

*Please grant me Your Peace that cuts through my fear,
so I can see clearly the person I am in Your Son, I hold dear.
Please grant me Your Grace for all I've done wrong,
so when tempted again I may triumph and be strong.
Please grant me the strength and courage to follow Your Ways,
so I can live an abundant life that sings to your unending praise.*

In Jesus precious name,

*Amen*¹

How did he get to that point? He had more than one Elizabeth helping him along.

Sometimes the Marys in our lives are not human beings, they are situations. You may know that the Chinese character for crisis is a combination of the characters for danger and opportunity. When a crisis occurs at work, or at home, or in a relationship - when a Mary you never expected or asked for shows up at the door of your life, perhaps there is something to be gained from asking, not just Why me? But why has this happened to me, that the mother of our Lord has visited me? How is it that the love and presence of God might be coming into the world even through this situation?

George MacLeod, the Scottish Presbyterian founder of the Iona Community, crafted a wonderful prayer entitled "The Glory in the Grey." Philip Newell quotes from the prayer in his book, *Listening for the Heartbeat of God*. I think it's a poem that tells us that, if we look and listen hard enough, we can see the love and presence of God coming in and through all of life. The magnificent and the mundane, the wonderful and the terrible.

*Almighty God...
Sun behind all suns,
Soul behind all souls...
Show to us in everything we touch
And in everyone we meet
The continued assurance of thy presence round us,
Lest ever we should think thee absent.
In all created things, thou art there.
In every friend we have
The sunshine of thy presence is shown forth.
In every enemy that seems to cross our path,
Thou art there, within the cloud, to challenge us to love.
Show to us the glory in the grey.
Awake for us thy presence in the very storm
Till all our joys are seen as Thee
And all our trivial tasks emerge as priestly sacraments
Within the temple of thy love.*²

One of the great things about having a prayer list is that we can look at it and see that sometimes our prayers appear to have worked. We can point to people who came through surgery with flying colors, people whose relationships have mended, people whose treatment manages to knock out the cancer. But there are other times when the healing miracles we ask for don't come, at least not physically.

This week I became aware that somebody on our prayer list, a person we've been praying for a long time, has gotten some very discouraging news. When his wife reported this to her children at a family meeting, she told them that, barring a miracle, he would not be getting better. One of her young sons said, "When is the miracle going to come?"

If this man does die, I hope their pastor and their community of faith are somehow able to help this family claim that miracles have already come to them in so many ways. They are people of such great faith. It was a miracle when chairs started appearing in the neighborhood beside every mailbox, so that when David could no longer go

out and walk more than a block at a time, he had a place to rest, and he could keep on walking. It was a miracle when his friends and family showed up with food, and companionship, and prayerful support. It was a miracle that he and his family met other brain tumor patients, including one named David Bailey, who helped them live one more day, and to love the time.

“Why has this happened to me?” can be a question asked in gratitude.

The other day I was in the Giant parking lot and I started looking around at the cars. I thought, “There’s a Lexus. There’s a BMW. There’s an Escalade.” There is a lot of money around here!

Then I thought about the brainpower concentrated in this area. I love being part of the kinds of conversations that people engage in here. I consider these things, and the incredible talent, and energy, and enthusiasm that are represented right here in this very room and I think, “Why has this happened to me? Why has this happened to us?”

On this morning of Christmas Eve, we know the answer. Because tonight, we will be celebrating that God comes into the world through human beings. Like Mary and Elizabeth. And Flynn, and Irena, and Derrick, and PJ, and Buel, and Dianne, and you, and me. God comes into the world through people, including people like us.

In Jesus’ name.

Amen.

Aaron D. Fulp-Eickstaedt

References

1 This poem/prayer was written by my friend Warren Musick in December of 2006.

2 Philip Newell, *Listening for the Heartbeat of God: A Celtic Spirituality* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1997)