

Internal Awareness

Luke 1:39-45

December 20, 2009

There was a news article in a newspaper a number of years ago that noted that according to the Alaska Department of Fish and Game both male and female reindeer grow antlers in the summer. The article further stated that male reindeer drop their antlers sometime between late November and mid-December. Female reindeer, on the other hand, retain theirs until after they give birth in the spring. The article pointed out therefore that according to every historical rendition of Santa's reindeer every one of them – from Rudolph to Blitzen – had to have been a female because all the reindeer in the pictures have antlers. The comment that concluded the article further noted: "We should've known this when they were able to find their way."¹

It was the Sunday before Thanksgiving and a Sunday school teacher wanted to correct some misunderstandings she sensed her preschoolers had about the holiday. She playfully said: "Let's see, Thanksgiving. That's the day when we think about the stuff we have and how we want more than anyone else has and how we don't care about anyone but ourselves and..."

The children all caught the sarcasm in her attempt and all started yelling, "No!"

And then one of the little boys thought he understood the point the teacher was trying to make and announced, "No, Miss Michelle, that's not Thanksgiving, that's Christmas!"²

Today's Gospel lesson is from the Gospel of Luke – a book known for its inclusion of many stories referencing women and the disadvantaged. The central characters in today's text are these two distant female cousins – Mary and Elizabeth. They both were visited by the angel Gabriel and informed they were going to get pregnant – not necessarily terribly good news in either case. Mary was only betrothed – engaged – to Joseph, not yet married; and Elizabeth was, well, up there in years.

Mary decided to go visit her older cousin. We're not really told anything about why and so we're left to imagine. Some have thought it might have been to have the word of the angel Gabriel confirmed or to hear a word of encouragement from Elizabeth. John Calvin, one of the well-known reformers, interpreted what Mary did as such and commended her for it: "There is nothing we should reckon odd in her seeking to confirm her faith by going to see the miracle which the angel had effectively brought to her notice. The faithful may be satisfied with the unadorned Word of God, and yet neglect none of his works which they realize provide support for their faith. Mary was above all right to seize upon the help afforded her, if she did not wish to reject what the Lord had deliberately put before her."³

Another thought offered has been that she made the trip for the same reason many teenage girls have gone to live with a relative when they've found themselves unexpectedly pregnant – to avoid embarrassment for themselves and their family.⁴

Others make a case for her purpose being to be near someone going through the same thing – someone she could commiserate with – someone she could talk with about stretch marks and backaches and morning sickness and swelling ankles and pickles and ice cream – someone she could pray with and laugh with.

Whatever the reason Mary went what is reported is what happened when they first greeted one another. "Four unlikely prophets gathered not in the wilderness but on the front steps of Elizabeth's home, two of them not

even born yet, and still John is already able to acknowledge the One who is greater.”⁵ John kicks inside his mom and causes her to heap blessings on this young pregnant thing in front of her – causes her to express her admiration of the roles she believes both Mary and the fruit of her womb are and will play in the carrying out of God’s plan – causes her to question how she could be so fortunate as to be the one to whom the mother of the savior of the world would visit.⁶

Christmas shatters our expectations – pushes us to see the world differently. Here’s how another put it: “Mary’s visit to Elizabeth isn’t just a meeting between two pregnant women. It’s the introduction of a Messiah named Jesus to a prophet named John. The kick of an unborn child isn’t simply a sign of fetal vitality. It’s the muscle-flexing of John the Baptist, leaping for joy ... (Christmas) helps us see things differently – to see a hug between Mary and Elizabeth as a meeting between Jesus and John, a kick in the belly as a fist-bump of recognition, a song of praise as a celebration of God’s ability to turn the world upside down.”⁷

Christmas – and its Advent - unleashes – births - within us joy. There are those occasions in this season when it’s as if we are pregnant - something similar to the kick of an unborn makes us aware that things are different between this person in history, Jesus; this creator of the universe, God; this comforter, the Holy Spirit; and us. An internal awareness causes us to see the world and our place in it differently and an unrelenting joy fills our being.

What marks that Christmas or the preparation of it is officially here for you? Most of us have a family tradition or two – a religious service – a ritual – a project – that sort of inaugurates the season for us – that births joy in us – that makes us a little bit more aware of what we are about in this season.

For some of us it’s the hanging of the greens – either at the church or in our own homes. It’s the act of putting up the tree, decorating the house and tree – retelling the stories of why this ornament was purchased, given. That’s at least one of the big ones for us. While the kids sometimes teased their mom about her telling them each year about each of the ornaments, it was what they enjoyed the most and what they most remember about our preparing – seeing the tears in their mom’s eyes and hearing again about the family vacations, how old they were when they made this one or gave her that one.

For others of us it might be that special night of making cookies or candy with friends or family. For others it’s the smells in the home. For others it’s the CD music playing in the car whenever you go someplace. For others, it’s going to hear a special choral presentation at church. Whatever it is that makes Christmas special for you, the result is often this sudden surge of joy inside.

One preacher gave this account of his eight-year-old helping decorate the tree: “For our eight year old decorating the tree is the highlight of her holiday. This year as each old, beloved ornament was re-discovered, she crooned over it, declaring each in turn to be her favorite, and recalling the family history of each beautiful or bedraggled piece. As usual there were a few casualties, a beak broken off a bird ornament, a tear starting to develop along one handmade snowflake, the hook missing from a decorated seashell. But tape and glue was quickly dispatched. No manner of chips, crunches, or cracks could squelch her joy.

“After everything had finally been carefully placed on the tree, our daughter began jumping on the couch in flagrant disregard of the standard house rule: no jumping. At the peak of each jump, with her eight-year-old height no longer a limitation, our daughter could see the ornaments hanging at the very top of the tree, and then enjoy the expanding width and number of decorations as her bounce took her back down to the couch cushion.

With every bounce up and bounce down, she reveled in the full glory of the brightly lit, weighted down tree. Squeals, oohs, and aahhs accompanied each jubilant bounce.

“I had seen the Bible first-hand: she was literally jumping for joy.”⁸

While we are socially conditioned not to be quite so expressive as adults – except after a touchdown or a spectacular dunk – joy is what is unleashed in us when we become internally aware that the Christmas message is alive in us. The point is: one virgin birth isn’t enough. We are all in need of having Mary’s experience in our lives. Every one of us here this morning is called to conceive Christ and birth him into the world. The intent of Christmas is for us to be reminded that we are the pregnant ones in whom God has done a remarkable thing.

The words Mary spoke following the recognition on the part of the unborn John and his mother, Elizabeth, are known as the Magnificat. They are words sung by a marginalized peasant woman only wanting to rejoice about what God has done and was doing in her life. While Mary wasn’t a politician or a revolutionary, the words she sang were radical – they rejoiced in the last becoming first – of the hungry being fed and the rich being sent empty away. They were announcing a hope for the world to be different as a result of this one growing inside her.

The words still call to be expressed by those who would birth the saving work of God in our day. We’re going to close with them today as an affirmation for ourselves. But first, I want to add a brief word about what Mary’s song has been responsible for down through the centuries as a means of further grasping the really radical nature of these words – and why they have inspired and hopefully still inspire people of faith.

The Feast of Fools was the title given to many celebrations that once were associated with Christmas. The Feast of Fools became a literal acting out of the Magnificat – a sort of witness to the God “whose inclination is to topple human power structures and to raise the downtrodden to a position of honor and feasting.”⁹ Remember, it was two marginalized, pregnant women who proclaimed the coming of the Messiah – not high priests or emperors or ordained preachers.

In Max Harris’ Carnival and Other Christian Festivals: Folk Theology and Folk Performance he notes: “Throughout medieval and early modern Europe, Christmas was a time for festive reversals of status. As early as the ninth century, a mock patriarch was elected in Constantinople, burlesquing the Eucharist and riding through the city streets on an ass. And as late as Innocents’ Day (28 December) 1685, in the Franciscan church of Antibes, lay brothers and servants ‘put on the vestments inside out, held the books upside down, ... wore spectacles with rounds of orange peel instead of glasses, ... blew the ashes from the censers on each other’s face and hands, and instead of the proper liturgy chanted confused and inarticulate gibberish.’

“Cross-dressing, masking as animals, wafting foul-smelling incense, and electing burlesque bishops, popes, and patriarchs mocked conventional human pretensions. So did the introduction of an ass into the church, in commemoration of the holy family’s flight into Egypt, and the braying of the priest, choir, and congregation during mass.”¹⁰

The Incarnation – Jesus’ birth – gave birth to an upside-down world – a topsy-turvy world. It was first celebrated by two pregnant women laughing and singing. Let’s read together the Magnificat and make room for the internal awareness it might birth in us this year.

1. Warren Times Observer, 12/21/2000, S-15 as quoted in a sermon by David E. Leininger, "News From Nazareth," www.esermons.com.
2. "An Iconoclastic Christmas," Homiletics, November – December, 2009, p. 61.
3. John Calvin, A Harmony of the Gospels Matthew, Mark and Luke, ed. D. W. Torrance and T.F. Torrance, trans. A.W. Morrison (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), p. 31.
4. "News From Nazareth."
5. Kate Huey, "Moving With Mary's Song," www.uss.org/worship/samuel/december-20-2009.html.
6. "An Iconoclastic Christmas," p. 59.
7. Ibid., p. 58.
8. Leonard Sweet, "Can You Jump For Joy?" Collected Sermons (ChristianGlobe Networks, 2007), 0-000-1415.
9. Max Harris, Carnival and Other Christian Festivals: Folk Theology and Folk Performance (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003), 140 as quoted in Feasting On the Word: Year C, Volume 1, p. 97.
10. This quotation, in Harris, Carnival, is from E. K. Chambers, The Medieval Stage (London: Oxford University Press, 1903), 1:317-18.