

Paradoxology

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The Gospel According to St. Luke 1: 26-38; 46b-55

December 15, 2019 | St. Charles Avenue Presbyterian Church

There is no one, absolutely no one, more vulnerable in traditional societies than a young woman. Virtually every week, we hear of some tragedy involving women, especially young women, from India, or Pakistan, Syria, or Somalia. Just a few days ago a woman in India, on her way to testify in court against a man who had raped her, was set on fire by a group of men, including the rapist. We have all heard of the so-called honor killings in places like Pakistan and Afghanistan. Women can be murdered by their own families for alleged “immoral behavior” including marital infidelity, demanding a divorce, refusing to an arranged marriage, even being the victim of rape. It is a very dangerous thing in lots of places just to be a young woman.

Imagine, then, the vulnerability of a young woman, probably only a fifteen year old girl, engaged to be married to a man in the ancient Middle East in a tiny village such as Nazareth; imagine, then, this young girl yet unmarried turning up pregnant. Public shaming and economic hardship would be the least of her worries. Her life as well as her reputation and ties to her family would be at risk. She would likely be without any protection.

We often rightly meditate on the revelation of God the Almighty in and through the birth of the helpless baby Jesus. But we, Protestants, sometimes fail to appreciate fully enough the revelation of God in and through this remarkable teenaged girl who speaks to an angel as though she was talking to the mailman, who immediately senses the danger implicit in the angel’s message (notice it is his message that terrifies her, not his angelic presence), and yet who says to the angel, “I am the handmaid of the Lord.”

I can scarcely grasp this young woman’s courage, placing herself in the hands of God Immortal and Invisible while facing a very visible and very tangible world of dangers. Mary stands for a moment in our text in the glow of heaven, an angel luminous before her; she is cocooned in an ellipsis of grace; she is favored, she is told, by God. But this girl is wise enough to know that just beyond the arc of light, in which she momentarily stands, a hungering darkness awaits and it would consume her if it could.

The poet W. H. Auden sets the scene in his Christmas Oratorio, “For the Time Being,” with these lines:

“Outside the civil garden
Of every day of love there
Crouches a wild passion
To destroy and be destroyed....

“The evil and armed draw near;
The weather smells of their hate
And houses smell of our fear;
Death has opened his white eye
And the black hole calls the thief
As the evil and armed draw near.”*

Into just such darkness and danger, this young woman steps in trust, rejoicing in the words of that song we call The Magnificat. She calls herself, “blessed,” and means it. And sings of the dawning of the reign of God.

She sings lyrics that could have been written by the prophets, by Isaiah, Amos and Hosea. She sings a song that calls forth justice in a time when judges are bought and politicians are sold to the highest bidder; she evokes peace in a time when bloodshed guarantees the best profits; she trusts herself to mercy when mercy is in short supply. She sings the lyrics that her baby one day will set to melody.

Whatever miracle there is to Christmas begins in this meeting in the tiny spotlight glow when a busy angel (he has so many visits to make in Luke’s Gospel) promises an innocent young girl that God favors her with the greatest heartbreak anyone could ever know.

I hardly know what to say about such a story. But I shall try to say a word.

...

Perhaps some of you have been there. Perhaps you have stood among the magnificent ruins of Rievaulx Abbey in Northern Yorkshire in England. Perhaps you have stood among the crumbling columns of the abbey’s church where, between 1147 and 1167, its abbot Aelred preached.

I wish I had time today to tell you about this humble and good man, born in Hexam in Northumberland into a family that served the cathedral there, raised at the royal court of King David I of Scotland, advisor to King Henry II of England, and friend of the great St. Bernard of Clairvaux, a man who crisscrossed Europe on diplomatic missions but who dwelled in a tiny two-room stone hut next to the church of his monastery rather than in an Abbot’s palace. Just about the only negative thing we can find said of him was that he was unable to stop forgiving repeat offenders. We don’t have time to speak more of this man, but I will take time to read you the opening lines of his sermon on the birth of Jesus.

“Today affection and ignorance are at war in my heart,” Aelred begins. “Affection drives me to speak, but ignorance bids me keep silence....”

“Who can contemplate Eternity being born, Power itself failing, Bread going hungry, the Spring itself growing thirsty, without becoming speechless? But who can contemplate the beginning of our salvation, the day of human healing, without bursting forth in a voice of

exultation and praise, the sound of one keeping festival? God has been made a man, who knows how to speak about that? Our Jesus, our Savior, our joy, comes among us; who can keep silent? And if we can neither keep silent nor speak, what can we do except rejoice?"**

...

I confess to you that I have no more nor less trouble believing in the Virgin Birth than believing in creation. Even resurrection is easy to believe in if you can believe that God creates everything out of nothing and holds everything continually in existence. The fact that there is something rather than nothing is the miracle, everything else is easy to swallow.

What I have a harder time believing is the incomprehensible love toward which the story of a Virgin Birth is just a sort of signpost pointing.

When we confess in the creed that Jesus "was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary" we are saying that the same self-emptying divine love that flows eternally between God the Father and God the Son flows now without reservation and without restraint into our humanity because a vulnerable young woman once simply said, *"Yes. If that's what you want, Lord, I'm at your service."*

The inconceivable is the love, not the conception of a Virgin. And this inconceivable love is all that stands between us and the darkness that would extinguish life, whether it is the life of an innocent young woman, the life of her helpless baby, or the life God promises to all of us.

...

At the end of a path in the garden at Gethsemane Monastery, the Cistercian monastery where the Christian mystic Thomas Merton once lived and where he is buried, there stands a statue of the Virgin Mary holding the baby Jesus in her arms. I remember sitting on a bench in front of the statue the very first time I visited there, wrapped in silence, my eyes scanning the statue, a bewildered and broken Protestant seeking to understand this most Catholic of symbols.

There portrayed in stone is Mary's young and beautiful face, her tender eyes that will witness such terrors and know such grief. Of course, there is the plump baby Jesus squirming and cooing naked in her arms. All the vulnerability you can imagine symbolized there in that innocent scene: all that vulnerability symbolizing the power of God's love. Really, even for an old Protestant, it is breathtaking to contemplate. And there I sat, doing just that.

Just before I stood up to continue my walking meditation that morning, my eyes fell on a detail I might easily have missed. On the ground, beneath Mary's right foot, a dainty little foot clad in a sort of ballerina's slipper, lay the crushed neck of a vicious serpent, its fangs bared, writhing in pain, dying under the delicate tread of that small young girl holding her baby.

...

The miracle of Mary is not about how she got pregnant. That is just an elegant signpost pointing to a conception beyond conceiving.

"The Infinite become a finite fact?"* The poet Auden asks.

Yes. And why?

The poet answers: because,

because...

"Nothing can save us that is possible:

We who must die demand a miracle."*

So says the poet. The miracle, the impossibility that makes our lives possible, is the incredible good news, the ultimate paradox, the inconceivable conception of God's love: the Master and Creator of the Universe reveals himself not only in the burst of a billion super novas, but in the trust of a young girl and the birth of her baby.

Let us turn now toward Bethlehem,

"Remembering the stable where for once in our lives

Everthing became a You and nothing was an It."*

Amen.

*W. H. Auden, "For the Time Being," in *Longer Collected Poems* (Random House, 1969), pp. 131-197.

**Aelred of Rievaulx, Sermon 30: "For the Nativity of the Lord," *The Liturgical Sermons: Christmas - All Saints*, tr. Marie Anne Mayeski (Cistercian publications, 2016) p. 3.