

Sunday, November 23, 2014 *Life Cycle VI*

Scripture: Luke 1:39-45

Sermon: "What Child Is This?"

A friend of mine is a young pastor in the United Methodist Church. When she was growing up her congregation only had women pastors on their staff. Not planned, just an accident, best person for the jobs. When she and her folks visited another church, she was surprised, 'Mom, they have a man for a preacher! Can men even *be* preachers?'

This passage shows one of the reasons our denomination has been proud to recognize God's calling in women's lives. When God invades the world, God needs no man to do it. Sorry, gentlemen, this may be hard on our egos. All God needs is two women. And they're not even "good" for what women are normally "good" for in a sexist world. One is too old to have a child, one too young. Most of history is moved by kings, generals, men with power. But these two women, Elizabeth and Mary, are nobodies, no power, no wealth, no status. And *they're* the ones God uses to make the world right. The children they bear turn history upside down. Hear this word.

Luke 1:39-45

39 In those days Mary set out with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, 40 where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. 41 When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit 42 and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. 43 And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? 44 For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. 45 And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."

That's the word of God, it belongs to you, people of God, **thanks be to God.**

We're at the end of our six week series on the life cycle. I've loved it, I've heard good things from you about it. And I'd love suggestions for future series. We've proceeded from oldest age to today when we talk about infancy. We're also in a time of year when we're about to get a faceful of holiday cheer, like it or not, the lights are up downtown, I first heard Christmas muzak in the grocery store in October. I'm still a sucker for it though, my favorite Christmas song is "What Child is This," with the little Celtic lilt to it, "This this is Christ the king, whom shepherds laud and angels sing, haste haste to bring him laud the babe the son of Mary." So I call this sermon "What is this child," to ask what do we stand to learn from infancy about God.

This story today is traditionally called "The Visitation," Mary, just told she'll bear a miraculous Son, goes and *visits* her relative Elizabeth, who is six months pregnant with John the Baptist. When the two mothers meet, the child inside Elizabeth leaps for joy. John is already pointing the way to Jesus before he's even born. Those of you who grew up Roman Catholic recognize parts of this scripture that Elizabeth speaks to Mary, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb." The Hail Mary was a prayer before it was a pass in football. It's a central part of Catholic prayer, and it comes largely from here. Elizabeth is the first person whom John points to Jesus. She won't be the last.

Elizabeth reminds me of that odd moment in a woman's pregnancy when total strangers can come up and ask (or not even ask) to touch your tummy. I know it can be gross, but it tells a strange truth. We *all* have a stake in this child, even total strangers.

Forgive me for memory lane—when I told a waitress at IHOP my wife could have one last meal before our first would be born, she said, ‘Say no more, honey’ and came back with chocolate chip pancakes, extra whip, extra chips, an act of sisterhood to a woman she’d never meet (I hope I tipped her well). If you’re about to give birth then we’re all in this together.

This story also reminds me of the first kick of a child. Our firstborn Jack first kicked in church when his mom was preaching. Our second first kicked in Cameron Indoor Stadium. I, the father, was in Cameron to shoot in a free throw contest for which I won nearly \$500—yes, I’m a former professional basketball player. Jaylynn coming to the game cost me most of that. We’re watching from the second row and she’s eating nachos, looking down. And I say “honey you need to pay attention and keep your head up,” as soon as I say that the guy on the other side of her catches the ball. She looks at me and says, “The baby kicked.” And Will, third child, we have no idea when he kicked first.

John kicks first when he’s near Jesus. And the church has imagined this says something about infancy. Martin Luther pointed to this passage as an argument for infant baptism. If the infant John can point to Jesus in utero then surely infants *after* their birth can recognize Jesus. Parents tell me when their children are born they can recognize their voices. They heard us for 9 months and can hear us better now (the rest of their lives they practice *not* hearing us). Politically this is interesting, young people are getting more liberal on questions of homosexuality, but more conservative on abortion. Why? Two reasons, one, science is suggesting so much about us is set in our DNA. That’s all in place from conception. And two is 3D ultrasounds. That thing looks alive in there. Because it is. John’s leap suggests that the youngest among us know more than we think. Just like the oldest, the most disabled, the weakest, the sickest, the poorest. God is closest to life when that life is most vulnerable.

And that opens up a question we don’t often talk about. What about when pregnancy goes wrong? I’ve often heard from women that miscarriage is the most painful thing in their lives. I’ve had friends who’ve been pregnant five and six times and lost each one. And nobody mentions it, so they grieve in silence. Here’s what this passage says: God will one day redeem every particle of creation. I know your hope is on hold. I can’t imagine how painful that is. But here’s the thing, when God promises he’ll make all things new that includes every scar, every sorrow, every atom ever made. Come quickly Lord Jesus, and do it.

I’m told that mothering a child is desperately weird. In one way this is an *alien* thing in you. Yet you’ll never be closer to another human being. In Rowan Williams’ terms:

Here is something that is most profoundly me, my flesh and blood, the sheer stuff of me, depending on me and vulnerable to me, and yet it is not me and will *be* strange and impenetrable to me.

And here’s the deepest mystery we have: God is Mary’s child, he’s her, and yet not her. And when we *believe*, God is that way with us too. God becomes us, yet God remains unbelievably different from us. Anytime we have faith we become Mary-like. Full of God, closer to God than any human relationship, and yet God remains God, higher and different than us and our judge. And that’s about as weird as this faith thing gets. We call it the incarnation.

This meeting between Elizabeth and Mary is *epic* (the word my youngest uses for everything). NT Wright calls it “The gospel before the gospel.” This is a “fierce bright shout of triumph 30 weeks before Bethlehem and 30 years before Calvary and Easter.” Mary and Elizabeth know something the rest of us don’t know and they rejoice. Rowan Williams calls this meeting a “conspiracy of hope.” These two know what God is up to and believe it before any other in world history. They can see farther than the rest of us and they delight.

Those of us in white collar jobs spend a lot of our time in meetings. Wouldn't it be nice in the meetings we go to, to catch just an ounce of this wild conspiracy of hope?

But all is not well in this meeting. Mary is pregnant before being married. She's betrothed, sort of in between engagement and marriage. She could be stoned to death for infidelity. What would you think of a not-yet-married girl told you she was pregnant and the child was from God? Yeah right, I've heard that before. Somebody get me a rock. The beginning of our passage says Mary went "with haste" to see Elizabeth. That is, she hustled *70 miles away* from Nazareth. This in a day when unmarried girls didn't leave home alone, let alone travel 70 miles. Is she afraid? Does she need reassurance, or just advice? We don't know. We do know this. Others will stare at her. Laugh at her. Wish for the worst for her. When he's born the child will wander away for three days while the parents search for him in Jerusalem. Later she'll lose him for three days in Jerusalem again, from Good Friday to Easter Sunday.

Giving birth to anyone is no picnic. How about giving birth to God?

The dangerous side of this reminds me of a story that sounds mythical. During the Nuremberg trials after World War II a gravedigger from Eastern Europe testified that the Jews came and hid in the graveyard. And one young woman gave birth to a baby in a grave. The gravedigger held the child up and exulted, "Lord, you have finally brought us the messiah!" Why did he think the child was the messiah? *Who but messiah could be born in a grave?* Later, he said, when the mother had no milk for the child, the child drank his mother's tears. Our messiah, Jesus, is born in a grave, his destiny is to die. Because that's *our* destiny. And every dark place, every grave however low, will be undone by this child's saving cry.

Jesus is not the first step in God's work to save the world. God's first covenant is with Israel. It includes prophets and patriarchs and heroes and villains, a whole family of faith. John the Baptist is the last Old Testament figure. He shows that whole era points forward to Jesus. So here are two bits of the Old Testament I didn't know before this sermon. One, Mary's blessedness is prefigured . . . in the book of Judges. Now my bible study has been working on Judges and it makes them shake their heads. This is the bible? they ask. Murder and rape and lying. Yeah, God can work with any of us. One story in Judges is of a woman named Jael. Israel fought against a man named Sisera, and when he was defeated Sisera hid in Jael's tent. She gave him milk, offered to guard the tent, and when he went to sleep, she drove a tent peg through his temple. Did I mention this story isn't PG? Judges sings this way,¹ "Most blessed of women be Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite, of tent-dwelling women most blessed." Who does that sound like?² "Blessed are you among women," Elizabeth says, and countless millions pray after her. Just like Jael drove a stake through an enemy so Mary will undo evil, only with her it'll be a stake driven through her son's hands. Another point of background, Micah is the last book of the Old Testament, the last prophet who points forward, until God's word goes quiet for 300 years, and that quiet broken by a baby's cry in Bethlehem. And one of Micah's last words is this,³ "For you who revere my name the sun of righteousness shall rise, with healing in its wings. You shall go out *leaping* like calves from the stall." *Leaping*. So many people think religion is grim faced rule keeping. Faith is actually pure joy. Think of the thing that would make you happiest, right now. To see someone you love and miss. To have your debts cancelled. A Duke national championship, go ahead. Imagine what silly thing you might do to celebrate if that happened. Now multiply it 100 fold. And you start to glimpse what Mary and Elizabeth felt that day. Leaping like calves, like John in the womb, like people who just died of happy. Among all women ever most blessed. That's the presence of God.

¹ Judges 5:24

² Luke 1:39

³ Micah 4:2

What more do we learn about God from infants. It's striking how much of our lives is determined before we are ever born. Our gender. Our eye color. Our height, unfortunately for me, weight. Our parents. Our country of origin and likely our language. None of us is self-made. We all have a belly button. And this is glorious. Henri Nouwen said this about birthdays:

We should never forget our birthdays or the birthdays of those who are close to us. Birthdays keep us childlike. They remind us that what is important is not what we do or accomplish, not what we have or who we know, but that we are, here and now.

When we first got pregnant with Jack and I was nervous my dad pointed out there's this great camaraderie, this all for one spirit in delivery wings. We all celebrate, we all want the best for this child, strangers will congratulate you for it (What'd I do? Not much really. A new dad said to me recently, 'it was my pleasure'). Back to the creepy stranger who touches a pregnant woman's stomach. This is one of the few moments of life that we're *all* all in on. We need this next generation to do better than us. To regenerate hope. To love others. You can tell total strangers with an infant "congratulations." Just for adding to our ranks. It's beautiful, thank you.

Now here's the deepest secret. God has a belly button. God has a mom. God has added himself to our human ranks. God climbed off his throne and become totally dependent on us. God became everything you are to make you everything God is.

Some more about infants. King James translates pregnancy as being "great with child." Love that. Great with child. One, we can adore infants. I've told you about this before, I found myself holding Brynly Collins once and marveling at her, her eyes and ears and face, and telling her, you're beautiful, look, this is like dad, this is like mom. And then I realized, you can only do this with infants! Now Brynly's walking around, she's 3ish, you can't adore her quite like that. Later she'll grow older still, and all you can do is compliment someone mildly. Infants get our full adoration, not just from parents, but from anyone who cares, from total strangers. *Why does that stop?* My suspicion is we all need that kind of adoration all the time. And we only get it in infancy, *if* then. *And* what we should adore as we dote on one another is signs of our father, God, signs of our mother, the church. Think again of Elizabeth and Mary. Elizabeth delights in her, treasures her, adores her. Because her Lord is with Mary. We should do the same with others of all ages. God loves us like that. Every inch of us.

Two, infants are totally dependent. While pregnant Jaylynn had to give up her birthright as a Texan to eat Mexican food, child didn't like it. Thanks kid. If you're addicted to something as a mother the child will be, if the mother has exercised and eaten right the child will benefit. Even now I often see my worse traits in my kids and feel the need to make a full apology to the planet. Total vulnerability, the same DNA, life dependent on others for every meal and nap and change of clothes. We are *that* dependent on God. We don't have our next breath without God. How often do we give thanks? And we owe thanks to more than God--St. Cyprian said "No one can have God for a Father without the church for a mother." We're totally dependent on the church for who we are. There is so much wrong with the church, not just this congregation, but worldwide. *And* she's also beautiful, gorgeous, majestic. And she's the only mother we've got, bless her.

Three, kids are resilient, First-time moms need to know this--kids are tougher than they seem. At first you think you'll break them, but they do just fine. We parents make mistakes and they survive, they get bruises and injuries, and they heal up quickly. 7 billion people on this planet managed to get born despite parents who were terrified 100% of the time. Exhale. So too in our faith. I know sometimes life with God life with the church feels touch and go. But faith is tougher than it seems. It'd better be. It's going to be tested.

Final point for today. This series hasn't been about how great one age is. It's been about how great all ages are together. Elizabeth is old. Mary is young. John and Jesus are not even born yet. God is old—ancient eternal. And all of us together make church. This is why human beings need the church so desperately. Why we need everyone here. Only together are we the new humanity God is birthing into the world.

I've told you this story before, forgive me, 4th year and I'm out of new stuff. This story is about two twins in the womb. One says, I think there's life after this. The other says no way, we have no evidence of anything more than this womb. I don't know, says the first, we're fed, warm, and we didn't work for it, maybe someone *gives* it to us. Nope, not gonna believe it, show me. Then the first, more cautiously this time, says, I think there's a mom. A mom?! No way, show her to me! I know I can't prove it, but I think there's a mom.

Friends, we're all waiting to get born into a new life with God. Some of us are closer than others. This is why Jesus wants us to get born again on the way. Amen.