

Why Me?

Luke 1:39-45

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Sunday, December 17, 2000

Just as Jesus Christ was born of Mary 2,000 years ago, so by his Spirit does he continue to be born within each of us. Receiving this new life will be as wonderful and painful for you as it was for Mary.

Elizabeth and Mary were quite a pair. Elizabeth was not a young woman. After years and years of praying for a child, after becoming used to not having a child, and after getting to the age where giving birth to a child was not a good idea, she gets pregnant with a baby she and her husband will name John who will prepare the way for Christ. By contrast, Mary was a very young woman. She too hoped for a child someday, when it would be appropriate. But not now. Not before she was married. Not while she was still a virgin. So we meet two women who are pregnant. One of them is too old to be a mother and the other is too young. But both are in the hands of God.

As the Bible constantly illustrates, God's timing usually takes us by surprise. Sometimes, as with Elizabeth, God moves too slowly. Sometimes, as with Mary, he moves too quickly. Like Elizabeth, some of you in church today have been praying for a long time for something to happen. You think now that it may never happen. Obviously you can't make it happen, because if you could have, you would have. Clearly, you are not in control. Like Mary, others of you find that your lives are all disheveled this year. God has conceived something in your life that you didn't ask for. It doesn't make any sense. You are frightened, confused, and, clearly, you are not in control either. When we come together in worship we are all confessing that, in spite of looking so different, at least we share a common limitation of not being in control of our lives. We have entered God's house. It is fascinating that, according to Luke's gospel, after Mary discovered that she would give birth to the Messiah the first person she went to, with haste, was not Joseph or her parents but her relative Elizabeth whose life was also clearly out of control. This means that the very first church service, the first community of believers brought together by the presence of Christ, were two pregnant women.

I have studied enough history to know that most of it is about men. At least, it is written as if it were mostly the kings, warriors, bishops, male philosophers and scientists who made all the breakthroughs and developments in history. But when God intervenes with the single most influential breakthrough in history, isn't it interesting that his only human agents are two pregnant women? I think that is because the process of pregnancy demonstrates something about how history, and all of us, finds hope for renewal.

Now I am on really thin ice here. I am not saying that women are created for the purpose of being pregnant. I am not saying that women ought to be or will be pregnant. I am certainly not saying that I know anything about being pregnant. I'm just saying that pregnancy is a wonderful metaphor for how we discover new life.

I did get to watch my wife's pregnancy up close. And I must say that I did a really good job: I kept my shape, I didn't get sick. It didn't really hurt me at all. But there was no miracle occurring in my life. (When there is a miracle in your life, it almost always hurts.) By contrast, everything in Annie changed by processes she could not manage. In fact, now the pregnancy was managing her. That is exactly what happens when a miracle begins to develop within any of us. Just as cells miraculously divide to create organs, flesh, bones, so does the Holy Spirit of God completely overtake all our lives creating new life. Soon it is apparent that you are not in control. Rather, it is the new life that is controlling you.

The new life God creates in you may give you a calling that scares you. It may give you gifts, passions, dreams you never expected to have. It may take loved ones away you would rather keep or give you new loved ones you would rather not have. Don't be surprised if you don't understand it. You're not the Creator. You're not supposed to be. You're supposed to simply receive it, and wait while it develops.

Waiting is one of the most important elements in receiving new life. When Annie first became pregnant, it seemed like nine months wasn't very long. Ironically, the closer she got to the delivery date, the more it seemed like it was going to be a very long time before this baby was born. Maybe you are waiting today on a relationship that is slowly changing, or a new job offer, or for word about healing that just won't come. The longer you wait, the harder it becomes. That is only because each day God has continued to move you closer to a new life. Like a pregnant woman who has come to term, it gets harder and harder to bear that new life in a body that has stretched further than you thought possible. Eventually, you get to a point of saying, "God, stop teaching me about patience. I can't handle any more lessons on that." "God, stop teaching me how to love difficult people. It was easier being mean." "God, stop teaching me to depend only on you. I've given you all there is to give." "God, please stop breaking my heart with the needs of other people. I can't keep caring so much!" When you say things like this, it is only because the new creation within you has almost matured to full term. You're almost there.

Maybe you are a woman who is not going to ever experience the physical act of birthing. But the new life that God has for you involves the even greater miracle of adoption. At first you put that option off as something way down the line. But if that is what God has conceived for you, then the day will come when you can't wait to adopt. Or maybe the future filled with hope doesn't involve children at all, or even marriage. Maybe God has conceived something more mysterious than what you imagined.

Again, it is only God who is controlling your new life. It is the nature of God to give you grace, which is what you need. It is not what you want, and certainly not what you deserve. But as grace, it will lead to your salvation.

When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, we are told that the child within her leapt for joy. As he did with old Elizabeth, God has conceived something in all of our lives. Maybe it is something like an old hope that has come back to life. Or something that we didn't really even want, but it is back in front of us again. Or maybe it is a new mission or a restlessness about where you are. This time of year, when we hear about the arrival of Christ, the thing that God has conceived within us comes alive. It jumps for joy, reminding us that God is still at work within us. At Christmas it is hard to ignore the holy thing God is doing in our lives.

Several years ago, at Christmas, I was walking downtown, late for an appointment. I rushed past a small group of young teenagers who were singing carols on the sidewalk. I should have kept running, but for some reason I stopped for just a moment. It was then that I noticed these teenagers all had some developmental disability. One young lady with Down's Syndrome had the job of playing the triangle. Whenever the director pointed to her, her face would light up, she would smile from ear to ear, and give her triangle such a whack. I was riveted by her. She became my priest. As my eyes teared up something inside me leapt for joy. I noticed the stressed out leaders of business and government around me who had also been captivated by this moment, dabbing their eyes. What was happening? Something deep inside, something planted by God, was touched as they sang, "the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight."² That holy thing God had started leaped up to our hearts and everyone of us wanted to join that group of singers saying, "I have disabilities, too. My spirit and heart have been disabled by cynicism, hurt, and anger. I would love to have your innocence and purity leap out of me as it does your little choir." Somehow at Christmas, it is easier to pay attention to the holiness of God within us.

When Elizabeth experienced this, her only question was to ask, "And why has this happened to me that the mother of my Lord comes to me?" Why me? We are a people who want to make sense of our lives, and to find cause and effect explanations for why life turns out the way it does. The hardest things to understand are not the tragedies, but the blessings that have come to us without reason. "Why me," we ask. The explanations are not there. That is because to try to explain life is only another way of trying to control it. One of the central messages of Christmas is that you are not in control of the blessings. There is no logic to a blessing, only gratitude.

As with most of our "why" questions, Elizabeth receives no answer. Instead, her "why me" questions simply evaporate as the joy within her leaps up to be so near the coming Christ Child.

Why you? Why has God chosen to bring something creative and life changing to you? It is not a bad

question, but it is not exactly the right one either. The only pressing question is will you receive this new life that is coming and give thanks?

O God Emmanuel, your Christmas gifts of faith, hope, and love have been waiting in our souls - waiting for you to make them leap up and take over our lives. Amen.