

We're Almost There – Brian Hartley
December 21, 2014

2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16; Romans 16:25-27; Luke 1:26-38

“We’re almost there!” That’s what my father used to say as we drove through the winter darkness on our way to my grandmother’s house. I would peer out from beneath the blanket that covered me and my younger brother in the back seat, try scraping off the ice that covered the windows, and stare off into the winter’s night hoping for a sight or a sign that Santa was guiding our ’57 Oldsmobile toward home. “When will we get there?” I would ask. “Soon, soon,” would come the reply. “We aren’t there yet, but we will be there soon.”

We will be there soon. In just a few hours, the earth will swing out at its furthest distance from the sun and we will experience the winter solstice. Over the course of the next few weeks and months, we will make our slow, laborious journey back towards the warmth, back towards the light. We will be there soon. In just a few short days, all of will gather in our homes, some in our pajamas, to open the presents that lie under the tree. We will be there soon. For today is the final Sunday in our long period of waiting, known as Advent, and come next Sunday we will officially be singing Christmas carols and celebrating the birth of the Christ Child.

But not...just...yet. We need to get the manger scene in order, with all the familiar characters in their appropriate places. Thanks to some of my former students, whose children’s faces light up my Facebook feed every morning, I have been introduced to numerous new characters in the story. Some have Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles guarding the perimeter, or storm troopers led by Darth Vader challenging any unwelcome visitors. Some have acquired a variety of robots who circle around the crèche, or Ken and Barbie dolls who stand hovering over the feeding trough like discombobulated time travelers. A few even feature dinosaurs, like *T. Rex*, who threaten any that would dare disturb the baby Jesus. One alumna, though, queried her innocent-looking boys about the strange severing of the three wise men’s heads tidily placed beside their lifeless bodies—apparently decapitated by an enfant terrible sent by none other than King Herod. We look for them all—the familiar characters of not only wise men, but shepherds, sheep, donkey, camels—and, even Joseph, the passive father, who like most first-time dads, stands dazed wondering just what he’s gotten himself into.

Today, however, we come face-to-face with one of, if not the, central characters—none other than the very first disciple, the first person to whom the good news of the Gospel comes, the Blessed Virgin Mary (or the BVM, as she is known in liturgical circles). Her story has been recounted through the ages and, in some cultures, has produced something of a cult-like following. Millions around the world pray to her, hoping that, like other powerful Mediterranean mothers, she will entreat her son on their behalf. But, whatever you think of her and of those who whisper her name faithfully, we all know that she is integral to the gospel story. We might be able to survive the decapitation of the wise men, but the mystery of the Incarnation hinges on this poor Palestinian peasant girl and her response. As Frederick Buechner says, “the whole future of creation hung now on the answer of a girl,” (*Peculiar Treasures*, 39). And I want to propose this morning that in Mary, and in the housing of the Son of God in her womb, this young woman models for us what it means to become temples of the living God. By her willingness to

say “yes” to the Creator of the Universe, she becomes the transitional figure that unites Israel’s past with her present in order to produce God’s future.

This morning’s Old Testament lesson reminds us of those echoes of the past, remembered faithfully by the people of God through their favored king, David. This scene serves, as Robert Farlee contends, as “an intriguing counterpart to the gospel.” As David finds himself in that brief hiatus that marks an interlude between his years of war and the rapid dysfunction that will come to describe his family and its members, he expresses a longing to build a house for the Lord. But instead, the prophet, Nathan, reveals that God wishes to make of the king and his descendants a “house.” In his richly-detailed exploration of this passage, Walter Brueggemann claims that this is rich wordplay at work, with special attention being attached to the word, “house.” At the beginning of the passage, the word is used by David to refer to a place, “which Yahweh neither wants, needs, nor permits.” Yet, God uses the same word to refer to a dynasty which He “would build for David and which David wants even more than he needs,” (74). Throughout the text runs this strange irony, “a striking incongruity of a dynasty now authorized and guaranteed by a God who will live in a tent,” (*David’s Truth: In Israel’s Imagination and Memory*, 75).

That same irony pervades the Gospel lesson. The God who had refused to be housed in a physical structure has now taken up residence in the womb of this adolescent woman who lives on the edge of empire. Throughout history, great leaders oftentimes built temples to house their gods. Those for whom this gospel was intended—those who experienced Greco-Roman culture living primarily in cities throughout the Mediterranean—would have thought immediately of places like the temple of Artemis at Ephesus (where we know there was a thriving Christian church) or the statue of Zeus at Olympia. But the Gospel writer is here saying something that verges on the ludicrous: the god of Israel, the one true God, has taken up residence in a nobody. David’s story continues not on some sceptered throne or some victorious battlefield, but in the child slowly developing in the belly of a non-descript child of the masses, unknown but to God alone.

This subtle, almost absurd, irony affirms for us that God chooses us and that God’s ways are not our ways. There is no hint here that Mary was looking for a job. She was not candidating to be THEOTOKOS, mother of God. In fact, her response is one of sheer surprise, “How can this be?” She cannot reconcile her own lack of means, her own lack of marital relations, her own sheer lack of status with the angel’s announcement. And any knowledgeable person reading this narrative in the late first century would probably have burst into laughter at God working in the backwater province of Galilee, well-known for its backwardness and marginalized reputation. Not only was Mary not an obvious candidate for such an honor, but it was as if God had gone out of his way to pick the most undignified person and place to be at work.

This is why Paul calls the gospel “the revelation of the mystery kept secret for long ages,” (Romans 16:25). That mystery, sketched out by the Gospel writers in their genealogical patterns, inclusive of marginalized women with questionable reputation (women like Rahab, Tamar, and Ruth), continues now in this young woman designated by the angel as “favored one.” And while we might all be amazed at how this narrative is spinning itself out, there exists a thread here that incorporates those faithful, yet excluded and marginalized, who, time after time, become God’s

chosen ones and live out his promises in hidden ways. Favor in God's eyes remains quite different from what the world, particularly the Roman world, looks and looked for. In his chapter on Submission in *The Celebration of Discipline*, Richard Foster says, "Authority does not reside in positions, or degrees, or titles, or tenure, any outward symbol. The way of Christ is in another direction altogether." Grace comes in ways and through people we would never choose but through which God continues to do God's work.

But it isn't just that God's ways seem strange or even bizarre to us. God's call seems impossible, at times. While Sarah laughed when she was told she would give birth, Mary says, "But I am a virgin." This gospel writer speaks more of the work of the Spirit than does any other and he oftentimes uses the word, DUNAMIS" (from which we get our word "dynamite") when doing so. At the beginning of the book of Acts, for instance, he says of the work of the Spirit, "You shall receive power," and then he goes on to demonstrate that work in and through the preaching of Peter. God's power is manifested in our story through that self-same Spirit whom, we are told "overshadows" Mary. This hovering of the Spirit takes us back to the very first words of Torah where the Spirit hovers over chaos before God's act of creation. Likewise, the Spirit is at work here bringing order from chaos in first-century Palestine.

This act of overshadowing was also used of God's presence resting on the traveling tabernacle in the cloud (Exodus 40:35) and metaphorically of protecting His people (Psalm 91:4). Again, then, we have this abstract concept attached to the holiness of God's presence in tabernacle and temple made symbolically present in the all-too tangible presence of a pregnant girl. And the angel tells her the lesson dramatically sketched throughout the Torah, that "With God nothing will be impossible" (1:37). Surely the God who had kept the Abrahamic covenant alive in Sarah's dried-up womb and later through the birth of Obed via the faithful foreigner, Ruth, will be able to continue the story through yet one more disregarded woman.

All that remains in the story is for Mary to respond to the good news brought by the angel. And it is in her response that we witness what God desires from each of us. Mary here chooses to identify herself as "handmaid," a deliberate echoing of the term used in the Old Testament by Hannah while praying in the temple of God for a son she would call Samuel. And, in so doing, she becomes the means of continuing the mystery of the gospel imbedded in the Old Testament and now revealed in the New. "Let it be with me according to your word!" she says emphatically. And at that moment the world tilts on its axis, the stars shine more brightly, and the miraculous shift from B.C. to A.D. becomes possible. In Mary, the Lord has taken up residence in a way previously unknown and never to be repeated. In her humble yes, God's divine YES has been confirmed and made possible.

This week has been a bit of challenge for me. Despite my best intentions to embrace the new, I hate change—and worse than change is chaos. Right now, my office is in chaos. Papers are missing, a few boxes are yet unpacked, and books are not yet in their proper places. You must forgive me, but, as my colleagues will tell you, I have a high need for order and stability in my life. And, just like my childhood self, I need to know that we are almost there. In the midst of this chaos, in a few short days, we will have our own symbolic meeting of Mary and Elizabeth as my Alaska daughter arrives, husband in tow and four months pregnant, to join her eight-months-pregnant sister for our celebration on Christmas night. There will be enough estrogen to sink a

battleship. My two grandsons will run circles around their grand Pere and there will surely be wrapping paper strewn all over the Hager household. Order and stability will be nowhere to be found and I, like Mary, I will look around and wonder, “How can this be?”

That same chaos and confusion may mark many of your lives and, most certainly, describes the state of our world. From Ferguson to Pakistan, the wounds of broken humanity cry out for resolution and response. Unarmed black boys are shot in our streets and bombs go off in school yards, killing and maiming young innocents. And all we get today is the story of yet one more poor, young pregnant girl. Yet, somehow, some way, this story suggests that God wants to take up residence in our midst—to house himself in our world of chaos and change. The Good News today is He doesn’t need temples; He needs willing, responsive followers—disciples through whom He can work. This is how God invades our world—through one person at a time who has the courage to say, “Yes.” And, in doing so, He promises us nothing greater or less than simply His presence in the midst of a time of instability. In a few short days that message, that word of hope, will spring to life anew in our midst. In the meantime, hang on, we’re almost there.