

Living In The “In-Between” – Brian Hartley

2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16; Luke 1:46b-55; Romans 16:25-27; Luke 1:26-38

Friday evening I put my wife, Darlene, on a plane so she could join our daughter and granddaughters some 3,645 miles away, in what is referred to as “The Land of the Last Frontier.” And so it is, that, for the first time in about forty years, we will celebrate Christmas apart. That means that, for a stretch of some nine days, we are committed to living in the “in-between,” a liminal space different from that which we inhabit during most of our lives. And, while we both have much to keep us busy, there will be a bit of emptiness and longing, a desire to hasten the time that will, at long last, bring us back together again.

That’s a little bit, perhaps, like we all feel this morning walking into church on this Christmas Eve. In much of evangelical Protestantism, Christmas Day services are collapsed into Christmas Eve, complete with all the tinsel and hallelujahs. And yet this year, here we find ourselves on Christmas Eve, surprisingly somehow still caught up in finishing off Advent. The kids are anxious to begin the celebration and open the presents, while we tell them calmly, “Just a little bit longer. Just hang on to your horses.” So, are we celebrating Christmas yet or are we still caught up in Advent expectation? How long exactly do we have to wait? Why can’t we simply jettison these Advent scripture texts altogether and get on with the fun?

Every family has different Christmas traditions. Some of you maybe will unwrap presents later tonight while others would never dream of touching a single parcel until after Christmas has officially begun. When I was a child, we had a family tradition that said that no Christmas presents could be opened until after my grandfather had read us the Christmas story from the Bible—in its entirety. Perhaps that’s why, even to this day, I associate that long-ago story intoned in the lower registers of my grandfather’s voice with the need to urinate. It could be especially onerous if he decided to provide biblical commentary or got side-tracked by one of his incessant jokes or stories. How could he possibly inflict on us this life in purgatory where we could tangibly see the presents but couldn’t pass over into the land of joy and uproarious laughter?

So here we are this morning—stuck in the “in-between” of the tail-end of Advent, longing to get the Christmas party started. Perhaps that is exactly the way Mary and Elizabeth felt in today’s story. By the third trimester of pregnancy, I have been told, many women are simply ready to be done with it. Hips sore, feet swollen, and subject to that continual banging from inside the uterine wall, they figure anything has to be better than being stuck in nine-month limbo. There exists a strange miasma of longing mixed with excitement. Elizabeth’s response to her cousin’s appearance suggests that the excitement created something of an internal flurry as well—the future John the Baptist literally jumping for joy, in utero.

Mary’s Song, which is typically the way we speak of this sung poem known in church tradition as the “Magnificat,” is one routinely employed in Benedictine worship. It is one of three New Testament canticles which is used repeatedly in the daily Liturgy of the Hours, typically as a bridge in Vespers, or Evening Prayer, after the daily lectionary lessons and before the prayers of intercession. It functions, then, like a hinge, joining together scripture and prayer. I would suggest, then, that its function mirrors its form.

That form is one of hymnic anticipation of the restoration of God's true order. In some three or four stanzas, dependent on how one chooses to divide the poem, the virgin Mary literally tells out the glory of God—that is, what we have here is a hymn of praise. If you have been following along with the Advent readings from Luke's gospel you will know that Mary is simply following the lead of other characters and anticipating the response of those who follow her. In many respects, Luke's gospel is like something of a musical with the narrator providing a story line, then the various characters breaking into song at appropriate points when the action swells. But the specific focus of Mary's song in this case is on what have been called the *anawim*, the poor, pious ones. In his classic study of the Infancy Narratives, Raymond Brown describes these folk as, "those who could not trust in their own strength but had to rely in utter confidence upon God: the lowly, the poor, the sick, the downtrodden, the widows and orphans. The opposite of the *anawim*," he goes on to say, "were not simply the rich, but the proud and self-sufficient who showed no need of God or His help" (351). We know from the narrator's second book, The Acts of the Apostles, that the existence of these poor folk is not purely hypothetical. In Acts 2, "Luke describes with nostalgia the Jewish Christian community at Jerusalem. These people sold their possessions and gave their wealth for distribution to the needy; thus they certainly qualify to be deemed 'Poor ones.' Their poverty was leavened by piety, including 'Temple piety,' for they devoted themselves to prayer and attendance at the Temple" (Brown, 354). There, in the precincts of the Temple, they were known as those who engaged in the continual praise of God—something that easily describes Mary's actions here.

The contents of the hymn reveal to the perceptive reader numerous Old Testament allusions, themes, and references which literally proliferate themselves the more in-depth one goes with the text. As spokesperson for the "poor, pious ones," Mary is seen here emulating in both form and content the song of Hannah, the mother of Samuel, another one who had been described as a "handmaid of the Lord." This parallelism continues later in the story as Mary brings Jesus to the temple, just as Hannah had brought young Samuel to the Tabernacle located at Shiloh. The joy that Mary experiences is seen to be a direct result of the goodness of God—even as was that of Hannah's. Yet, in the case of both women, it is clearly understood that though they have been blessed individually, the gift of God was for a much larger purpose—the salvation of God's people.

What is distinctively different about the two women and their respective hymns, though, is that Hannah's verse is rendered in the present tense whereas Mary's is rendered in a different tense (Greek aorist). This particular Greek tense is most often used to speak of some action in the past which is now coming to fruition. The salvation of which Mary speaks had begun long ago in the heart of God but would be consummated only in the death and resurrection of her child, Jesus—something clearly anticipated a bit later in the narrative where we are told that he would "pierce her heart." The offense of the cross is clearly already being spelled out here in this early hymn with the idea that wealth and power hold no real value in God's kingdom. For Luke, Mary is being put forward as the first Christian disciple, a place she continues to exercise in the tradition of the church, and it is she who is seen proclaiming the very heart of the message of that gospel even before her child is born. At the very end of her song, we even get hints that the salvation which Jesus will bring will move beyond the people of Israel. What the Evangelist seems to be suggesting here is that we don't have to wait until everything has "come to pass" before we can begin to see the hand of God. In fact, today's passage seems to suggest the very opposite, that it

is God's word that can be trusted—even when we find ourselves in those painful in-between times of life.

But there is one caveat here which oftentimes gets overlooked. It was Lauren Winner who first brought it to my attention in an article some nine years ago. In writing of Mary's response, called in Latin the *Fiat mihi* ("Let it be to me according to your will"), Winner suggests that we dare not utter such a response unless we are willing to join Mary in a willingness to be interrupted. She says, simply: "(Mary) noticed that she was being interrupted, she recognized the interruption came from God, and she embraced it."

Now, I don't know about you, but I don't like to be interrupted. As an off-the-charts J on the Myers-Briggs personality assessment, I find it very difficult to "live in the moment." I line out all 16 weeks of a semester, carefully sequencing the material and providing a linear outline of how to get from A to B. My days start promptly somewhere between 4 and 5 a.m. and my nights end, usually, somewhere between 8 and 10 p.m. If you ask for a particular book in my library, I can usually take you right to it. In short, I am something of a control freak who has spent his life in a defensive posture, trying to ensure the safety of all those in my care by exercising judicious caution and mapping out strategies to defend against worst-case scenarios. In my book, risks are to be carefully managed, never joyously embraced.

But today's central character is the youthful Mary; if anyone ever had to entertain an unplanned-for interruption, it was she. These days, couples often meticulously plan out the desired birth date of their children. In fact, one of the more stock plotlines of romantic comedies oftentimes features the turmoil of a couple who bump up against the inability to control such an outcome. Yet Mary faces not only an unplanned-for pregnancy, but having to live with the mysterious circumstances that surround such an event. Can you imagine? I have no idea what this Jewish peasant girl expected her life to be. Perhaps life in a first-century patriarchal society necessitated that she would simply be the passive recipient of other people's choices. But this "Grand Interruption" would forever shape not only her own personal life, but would frame the very center of God's great salvation history. Saying yes to such an unanticipated event took not only courage, but extraordinary trust, as well.

Being stuck in an in-between time, and faced with an unplanned-for interruption, can be a cause for great anxiety. For hundreds of years the people of God had continued to wait, hoping that somehow God would fulfill his promises. And according to all of the narratives we have from that period, many believed that they knew exactly how God would break into history and reveal God's self. Yet the message of today's texts suggests that God's appearance may come when and where we least expect it. God shows up in a poor unwed mother and in a couple who have lost hope of ever having children. And the Magnificat confirms that God's revolution not only interrupts "our tidy, ordered lives but our whole social order. [In fact,] God's reversals and interruptions are already at work in the world and invites us to participate in them" (Winner).

Today's good news is that we, too, need to have our eyes and ears open, otherwise we might just miss God's coming into our midst. Like Elizabeth, who had given up hope for a child, and Mary, who never dreamed that she would be bearing one, God oftentimes comes into our mundane everyday lives when we least expect it. God dares to challenge our carefully scripted lives and

invites us into a life of adventure that demands risk-taking. That, my friends, is a challenge for this 60-year-old risk-averse professor. But I invite you to ask, along with me, if you are willing to be interrupted on this “in-between” day. For, like Mary, on our answer may hinge not only the script that directs the rest of our lives, but a story much bigger than us, or even that of our family. On our answer may hinge the next chapter here at St. Paul’s or in the little village of Greenville, Illinois.

It is, as Frederick Buechner reminds us, “what keeps the wild hope of Christmas alive year after year in a world notorious for dashing all hopes...it is the haunting dream that the child who was born that day may yet be born again even in us, in our snowbound, snowblind longing for him,” (*A Room Called Remember*, 65). And so, on the cusp of the joy of Christmas Eve on this fourth Sunday of Advent we cry out: “Fiat mihi”—*let it be with me, according to your word.*