

The Sunnybrook Pulpit

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December 11, 2016

From Barren to Blossoming

And Mary sang: "Although I am God's humble servant, God has noticed me..." -

Luke 1:39-56

Reused from 2012.12.16

The stories of Christmas are stories of surprise, of quite unexpected events happening in the most unusual of ways. An elderly couple named Zechariah and Elizabeth conceive, long after they have given up hope. A virgin mother conceives, long before she had even started to hope. Shepherds receive a band of caroling angels, something they would never have even considered hoping for. And wise men from the East encounter the king they hoped for, not in a palace, but in a manger.

Each of them had a way they thought their lives were going to work out, an expectation of how they thought their lives would unfold. They knew their story, what had brought them to this point, and they thought the rest of their story would unfold with some continuity with the old. Some of them were resigned to that old story; some of them looked forward to it.

But in every case, the stories of Christmas are about how God's story turned out better than the stories they had for themselves. Each of these characters is invited, and compelled and drawn into God's story, and in every case it turned out to be better than they had resigned themselves to, better than they had dared to dream for themselves.

Each of us has some sense of how our story is going, where it has come from and where it is going. Some of us are resigned to the story we tell ourselves and some of us are excited about it, but in every case, let me suggest, your old story is not the final edition.

"Maybe your old story is one co-dependent relationship after the other and maybe the only reason that's your story is because that's what your mom did or that's what your dad did and it's all you know.

Or maybe you are so much older than people normally are when they realize they are gay and for decades you've tried unsuccessfully to be straight not knowing that anything else was possible. Or maybe your old story that you think is fixed in stone is that you aren't someone who has real faith, or who has anything to give or who is so strong they can't show any vulnerability."¹

The good news of Christmas is how what was barren births new life. That is why we "deck the halls" with evergreen boughs and holly, to symbolize that even at this most barren time of the year, when the branches of many trees are bare, and the outside world is decked in shades of white and brown, the world is merely dormant, not dead.

The good news of Christmas, to use the language of the prophet Isaiah, is how a barren desert is transformed into a blossoming garden, how a people in exile, who thought that their future was barren, will find themselves restored with singing unto Zion. The good news of Christmas is that we are not limited to our old stories, just as a barren old biddy² can still birth something new, just as the lowliest of peasant girls can become *theotokos*, mother of God, just as squalid shepherds can receive the glory of an concert from the heavenly host, and just as the wisest of magi can have their highest hopes for kingship revealed as narrow and small. In the same way, our old stories are, in every case, too narrow and too small. God's story is, in every case, better and greater and richer than the poor ones we tell ourselves.

Now to be clear, I am not saying that everything that happens is somehow God's plan. It is perfectly obvious to me that there is too much horror and tragedy and cruelty in the world to be consistent with the idea of a loving God. Rather, I am saying that in even the most horrible of events, God is at work, inviting us to join our stories to the great story of God's reconciling, transforming love.

¹ from Nadia Bolz Weber, "Pregnant old ladies and other signs that God's story is better than the one we tell ourselves," from <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/nadiabolzweber> for December 11, 2012.

² I use this phrase cautiously, knowing that it is both ageist and sexist, trusting that those who read this will share humour in both the phrase and the situation, just as another barren old biddy by the name of Sarah did.

Often in the stories we tell ourselves, the parts of ourselves of which we are proud are exalted, and the parts of which we are ashamed are diminished. But in God's story, as Mary sings, the proud are humbled and the humble and lowly are brought low, and in God's story for us, I think it is often the same way.

When I was growing up, I expected that one day I would be a professor, an admired teacher and researcher. I was proud of my brain, my emotional and spiritual life I never paid much attention to. And I went to university, studied science, planned to be a marine biologist.

But God's story for me was better than the one I had for myself, and it involved the humbling of things of which I was proud and the lifting up of things that I held of little account. I got this bizarre call, to become a minister rather than a prof, and a pastor rather than a scientist. Becoming a minister has meant I have had to learn to accompany people in their weakness, and that has meant that I have had to come to terms with my weakness, and to discover that my weakness is my greatest strength. In lifting up the neglected spiritual and the emotional aspects of my personality my life has been richer than I could have imagined.

I once did a funeral for a man who was strong and physical, a hard worker. Like many men, he wasn't very comfortable being vulnerable. Most men have an easier time being frustrated and angry than they do being affectionate or grateful. Most men are socialized to be strong, in control. It is easy to be strong and in control and to be angry, but we cannot be affectionate or grateful without being vulnerable. Well, this fellow, whose name was Peter, had a rig accident that resulted in the amputation of his leg. And his family said that that experience changed him. He became a more demonstrative person. That encounter with his own fragility, his own mortality, his own vulnerability, made him more appreciative, more affectionate, more grateful. And his life became richer without the leg, than it ever was with it.

They didn't say it, but I think they were grateful, if not for the accident, then for its consequence, because their father became closer to them as a

result. Their family life was richer because his pride in his strength and control had been humbled and the despised parts of his personality had been lifted up.

There are people sitting here today who are resigned to an old story. Perhaps you think your life is pretty much over. Perhaps you think it is just the same old, same old now until the day you die.

There are people sitting here today who are excited about the old story you are telling yourself. Perhaps you think you have it all planned out. But let me tell you, it probably won't go the way you plan, and at times you will be devastated that it isn't going according to plan.

What I have to remind myself of, over and over again, that God's story is always better than the stories we tell ourselves. Today your spiritual task is, in some small way, to release your tight grip on your own story, so that you can open yourself to the birth of a greater story, a bigger story, a richer story than you can possibly imagine, the story of how what is barren will blossom. Amen.