

“THE GRACIOUS INTERRUPTION – THE IMPOSSIBLE PROMISE”

Rev. Dr. Floyd Churn December 20, 2009

Scripture: Luke 1:26-56

The origins of this fragment of an ancient manuscript I am about to read to you lay buried in considerable mystery; beyond questions of authenticity, however, I believe there is enough truth within the words to share it with you this morning. I will try to read it with some of the mixture of feeling I believe to break forth from these words from a young woman’s journal.

Journal

A golden afternoon here in Nazareth, and some quiet time, a rare treat. I have been treasuring all the things that have happened and all the words that have been spoken, and pondering them in my heart these past twelve years. My heart is still suffused with joy, even though there is much I still don’t understand. But I feel that it’s time to put some of my joy and puzzlement into words; I should have begun this journal years before.

Yes, it’s hard to believe our son is twelve now – on the verge of Jewish manhood! We have just come from a most amazing and frightening visit to Jerusalem with a large group of our family and neighbors from Nazareth. Halfway home we discovered our son was missing; we were at wits end! Back in Jerusalem he was, speaking with the teachers in the temple, and every bit as wise and insightful as these learned elders. Once past the anger and the anxiety, I treasured this experience in my heart as well, for I realized that all the strange and wonderful things surrounding his birth were true signs our son’s destiny.

As I call to my mind and heart all that happened in those days when I became a mother in my mid teens, I’m still astounded that our God would choose a vessel such as I. When I sang of the Lord looking with favor on the lowliness of his servant, I wasn’t being modest. I would have considered myself the least likely candidate to bear the messianic promise we had all been longing for, for years...centuries!

It all started with that visit from Gabriel – and if you think having such an awesome visitor is anything but terrifying...I was both perplexed and panicked. Why our cat must have leapt 4 or 5 feet in the air and bristled and hissed when that alarming creature suddenly appeared in the garden – a hair-raising moment of sheer terror. I’m sure my whole body was shaking even as this creature said, “Be not afraid.” I remember only a few phrases and I’m certain I didn’t understand all he was saying about “the throne of David,” “a kingdom with no end,” “the Son of the Most High,” or the part about the Holy Spirit in all of this. All I could say was, “Let it be...let it be...” And I was still shaking, and still utterly perplexed.

To have my simple life interrupted in such a way was more than I could possibly begin to understand. Who was I? Why would I be the one to find favor with God? My life was so ordinary. Surely there were Hebrew women of prominence married to husbands of high religious position...not common carpenters. I was planning on a simple, quiet life here in this little town with Joseph, my beloved, my betrothed.

Then I began to ponder what this all meant...and those words, “Nothing will be impossible with God.” But I did begin to have some doubts along the way...about God’s intent, and my ability to bear this impossible mission of motherhood. I worried day and night about the scandal that would inevitably follow...a baby out of wedlock...a father I couldn’t point to...poor Joseph humiliated. I would surely be ostracized by my family and neighbors.

It wasn’t until I visited my elderly cousin Elizabeth, out in the hill country, that things began to clarify a bit, and I began to realize I wasn’t the only one God had visited with surprising and life-changing news, possibly history-changing. She and Zechariah were celebrating a miracle of their own and at the same time dealing with much distress: Elizabeth, of all people, expecting a baby at her age...and Zechariah struck dumb because of his momentary disbelief...speechless to express his joy and his frustration. Gabriel had been involved in that little surprise too!

What an incredible older cousin, this Elizabeth. When I came to her house and she invited me in, she suddenly clutched her enlarged belly with a look that was both pained and amused. I guessed that being about six months into her pregnancy, that little baby inside must have given her a powerful kick, as I later found the unborn are wont to do to remind us they are still there and getting as impatient as we are. I would feel those kicks in months to come. But no...insisted Elizabeth, this was not a kick but a leap for joy by the child of her womb, as soon as she heard and recognized my voice. This baby too recognized the presence of God’s Spirit in the house, she said, and had to jump for joy that God’s promise was so near, borne by—I still can’t comprehend it – by me. I guess some people are given eyes to see the world around them and some are given eyes to see the presence of the Holy in the world. Dying autumn leaves...or a burning bush? The sun setting...or a divine Artist’s glorious pallet? A worthless beggar...or a beloved child of God? A startling kick... or a leap of joy?

Despite Gabriel’s words, I don’t think it really began to come home to me that I had some extraordinary role to play until I heard this wise old lady, beyond the far limit of childbearing years, as I was barely into them – until I heard her say... no, cry out loudly, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb!” It took a human voice more than an angelic one to awaken me to the unique calling for which God had, for some inexplicable reason, claimed me in my youthful innocence.

Well, I was moved as never before and thought to sing a tender lullaby of praise and joy to this child just beginning to grow within me, maybe one that I would someday sing when I rocked my baby to sleep. And I started out in that soft pensive mood; I remember the words well: “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.”

But then something strange happened, and I found myself singing words that I would never have expected to be part of my lullaby to this child yet-to-be-born. They came from my heart, yes, they were my words, but at the same time they came from beyond myself...from beyond my little world of anticipating a birth to bless our family: Joseph, that pillar of courage and love in the face of all that gossip about my condition...and me, naive teenage bride. There was a greater family that would be blessed by this birth, just as Gabriel said.

I began singing words not so much of sweet tenderness but of stark revolution, of the mighty ones being brought down and scattered, and the lowly ones being lifted up in honor and dignity and hope and justice. I'm not sure where that came from – it was not my intent...but it *was* my lullaby nonetheless. As I sang, I realized even more deeply that this child, whom we were told to name Jesus, was not just a gift to bless our family, our clan, our generation, but for all people and especially to the downtrodden and dishonored. Jesus – the one who saves – my son - was coming to turn a world upside down even as he would save it from itself. His coming – I still don't fully understand how this will all happen – his coming will not only change people's hearts, it will transform the social landscape so that "justice will roll down like like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream." as one of our great prophets wrote. My son's birth was to bring that about...*my son* was to turn the world upside-down!

So certain did I feel these things as I sang this strange lullaby, that I suddenly realized I was singing of these great transformations in the past tense...as though they were already reality and the great injustices and unevenness of the world, that seem so real and so intractable, are in fact the unreality. I remember my words well: "he *has* looked with favor..." "he *has* shown strength..." "he *has* brought down the powerful..." "he *has* filled the hungry..." *These things* are real – the great, damaging discrepancies among God's children have no future. Here I was singing about a spiritual and social revolution in a lullaby to my unborn child!

But how is this going to happen? I still wonder. I do recall with some foreboding the words of that old man Simeon, who met us in the temple when Jesus was just a few weeks old and said our son would be a sign that many would oppose...and that a sword would pierce my soul as well. I often think of those words...and feel disquiet in my heart, as I wonder what may lie ahead.

My unintended lullaby brought home to me another deep insight about children who are born into the world. My son is to have a unique role to play in God's salvation drama...but every child has a destiny shaped by God. Every child is given not just for the child's parents, but for the world...for the life of all God's children. I think it was as I sang those words that surprised even me that I came to realize that this son Jesus to be born would not be my son, not mine to possess, but God's Son given to me to love and care for. For how long?. And that every son and every daughter do not belong to their parents but to God, they are all *God's* children...*God's* daughters and *God's* sons. What a difference that makes; I know it does for me. I must let my child be the Son God intends him to be, not mine to shape in my image or Joseph into his, but into the unique person God will shape. I wish I could share that insight with every mother...every father. But who will ever read my words? Who will ever find this journal of my heart... this journal that I write on this quiet afternoon as I watch my twelve year old son playing with his friends – running, leaping high, cavorting in the bright Galilean sunshine of this warm day here in these hills of Nazareth.

Here ends this journal fragment. To God be the glory.