
Church of the Beatitudes United Church of Christ

Why Has This Happened To Me?

A Sermon by

Rev. Dr. Nancy Nelson Elsenheimer

Scripture: Luke 1:39-56

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Church of the Beatitudes United Church of Christ
555 West Glendale Avenue • Phoenix, Arizona 85021
602-264-1221 • info@beatitudeschurch.org
www.beatitudeschurch.org

🎵 God is still speaking.

Of all the people in the world that I envy, I think I envy the most the people who mail their Christmas cards out so that I receive them the day after Thanksgiving! My Christmas letter is still not finished. I now have all four paragraphs, but am still waiting for some photos to add. Our paragraphs describe the last year—achievements, triumphs, joys and sorrows. Our letter gets mailed out to family and friends across the country. It is a family tradition that began probably thirty years ago, days before e mail, days before Facebook and Twitter. Some years the Christmas letter became an Epiphany letter, not mailed out until January. Last year, it never got sent out. This year, it will go out.

For don't we all like opening the mailbox and reaching in, and finding that hand addressed letter, with a real stamp on it, and a familiar return address. "Oh, my gosh, Bill and Judy, from Washington, Missouri. I haven't heard from them since last year. And look, a picture of granddaughters! Wow, it is good to hear from them." Letters from friends, beautiful Christmas verses, words of hope and good news. The greeting card business is alive and well.

This week I received also a yearly letter from a former seminary professor. He was my professor of Christian Theology, now retired, still writing, still thinking theologically, and he writes: Dear former students and friends, What a year for our country! Two continuing wars, the worst recession in memory, and as of this writing, no needed health reform. These, accompanied by a swine flu epidemic possibility, rampant terrorism and tyranny, poverty at home and abroad, add up to an ongoing list of threatening conditions. For the church as well, despite vitalities in the Global South, Western mainline Protestantism declines and divides, while Roman Catholicism and Eastern orthodoxy harbor problems of their own. Ecumenism fires burn low, evangelization is too often hobbled by bad pluralism theory, and a once burgeoning evangelicalism shows signs of cultural captivity and internal disputes. This newsletter, following last year's on hope, takes up its necessary partner, realism."¹

Well, peace on earth, good will to to you too, Professor! See what they teach you in seminary!

Four weeks ago we lit the Advent candle of hope and talked about living in the present as well as hoping for the 'not yet'. Is realism the partner to hope? O Little Town of Bethlehem, "The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight". Is fear the partner to hope? The Audacity of Hope. The boldness of hope, disregarding the seeming reality. Is willfulness the partner to hope?

The Arizona Republic has been sharing the story of Stephanie Nielson, the woman who was badly burned when the small plane in which she was riding crashed in St. John's, Arizona, on August 16, 2008. Her husband Christian was also injured. His flight instructor died. Her story is following her year of recovery, from her physical surgeries to seeing herself in a mirror for the first time since the crash, to reconnecting with her four small children. Stephanie wanted, at times, to die. At the same time, she had a will and a hope to live. She had taped these words to her refrigerator, words of Washington Irving, "There is in every true woman's heart a spark of heavenly fire, which lies dormant in the broad daylight of prosperity; but which kindles up and beams and blazes in the dark hour of adversity."²

¹ Gabriel Fackre, Theology and Culture Newsletter No. 49, Advent 2009.

² Stephanie.azcentral.com

It is easy to have hope when things are going well. It is easy to have hope when you have a job, even if you don't like your job; when you have food and health insurance and a roof over your head. It is a lot harder to have hope when all you can see is darkness ahead: no relief from pain, no joy in living, no confidence about the future, no love for yourself or really for others.

“There were days when Stephanie could find that spark in the mirror. There were days when she couldn't.”³

What about you? Do you have that spark of heavenly fire? Do I have that spark of heavenly fire? We don't really know where Mary set out from in this passage. We always think of Mary as Mary of Nazareth, but one Christian tradition says that Mary was born in a cave near the Bethesda pool in Jerusalem where her son Jesus would one day perform miracles of faith. They incorporated the cave into a beautiful church with incredible acoustics and named it for Mary's mother, St. Anne. How did Mary get from Jerusalem to Nazareth in the north country? We don't know. That part of the story is left out. From wherever she is, Mary sets out with haste, with a spark of heavenly fire, and runs through the hills of Judea. She is pregnant, and she runs up and down North Mountain, or across South Mountain preserve. She runs and she runs until she finds Elizabeth, her elderly cousin, and babies leap and blessings are shared, and words pour out from Mary's lips like rain in the desert. Not her words. Not her words at all. Magnificent words. Magnificat words. Preacher Barbara Brown Taylor says, “Mary is not singing the song—the song is singing her and what music, what verse.”

God has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly. God has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. God has not forgotten God's people, no, no, no, all the way back to the promise to Abraham, God has remembered.

This is it: Memory is the partner to hope.

In the midst of change and conflict, we live our lives. Good and bad, we live each day, trying to be a better person, a better husband, wife, partner, mother, father, grandmother, grandfather, neighbor, friend, church member. We look and listen back to those pictures in our head, those voices from the past. We remember who we are and where we came from. Not just our parents, but many of us also from a church family where water touched our foreheads and we likely screamed at our baptism, but we were named into a new family, child of God, disciple of Christ, member of Christ's church. We live in the reality of everyday living, but that is only one point on the journey, one dot in time, changing in the blink of an eye. All before that, memory. All that follows, hope.

This is the fourth Sunday in Advent. While to the shopping, retail world that means only five more shopping days until Christmas, in the Christian world, the Christian year, Advent is the beginning of the year. We are only four weeks into this new thing that God is birthing. We are only four weeks into laying the foundation for everything else that is coming to us in this spiritual year. Think of it this way: All of the hope, all of the peace, all of the joy, all of the love is still in our future. The spark of heavenly fire within us is just beginning to burn. If all the stops were off, if God and you could do whatever you want in your life, whatever kind of growth or development, whatever kind of birth or new birth, what would that be? What would it be in your personal life? What would it be in your family life? What would it be in your church life?

³ Ibid.

Advent is a time to rekindle hope and peace and joy and love. Advent is a time for us to dust off our faith and get it in working order again. We have a big year ahead of us. We cannot let all those things my seminary professor wrote about, tyranny and terrorism, poverty and recessions, wars and hatred, we cannot let those things win. God promised us more than that. We promised God more than that. Neither Elizabeth nor Mary said “Why has this happened to me?” in a way that cursed God or questioned God. Both said, “Why has this happened to me, that I would be so blessed, so favored, so surrounded by love?” “There is in every true woman’s (and man’s) heart a spark of heavenly fire, which lies dormant in the broad daylight of prosperity; but which kindles up and beams and blazes in the dark hour of adversity.”⁴ Amen.

⁴ Stephanie.azcentral.com