

BIRTHS ARE ANNOUNCED
Rev. Gary Magarrell December 6, 2009

The immanent arrival of a new baby is a very exciting time of expectation and joy. It is also a time when concern is expressed for the safety of the mother and the health of the soon to be born child. No matter how many children there are in a family, the new birth changes the family dynamics as a place is found for this new child.

So significant is this event that we celebrate the birth date for as long as the person is alive. My parents have been gone for some years and I still mark their birthday as a day of celebration and thankful remembrance.

A birthday is an occasion for joy and thanksgiving, a time when we can tell the person how significant their life is to us. Indeed we need to remind ourselves to do so while the person is alive.

Recently I read a most fascinating book called “I Am A Hutterite”, a story of a woman’s looking back to her upbringing in a Hutterite Colony in Manitoba and her family’s life after they left the communal lifestyle. She speaks of her mother having a child a year and of the sarcasm of the local hospital staff who said to her as she went home with the new baby – see you again next year!

Some us are only children, others are from larger families. My son in law is child 16 of 17. However, whatever our place in families, our birth is significant and worthy of celebration.

Today we read of the birth announcements of two children – John the Baptist and Jesus. Traditions grew up quickly around these two men and the stories of their birth are interesting stories indeed and part of the unfolding narrative of Christmas.

Our Gospel reading was of a priest of the temple named Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth. The story in Luke talks of both advanced in years, a righteous and good couple who were childless. To be childless in that culture was considered a tragedy particularly for the woman who was looked upon with open derision and pity by the other women.

Zechariah was in the temple one day as it was his turn to burn the incense. You recall how Isaiah years before, when in the temple filled with incense, had a vision of God surrounded by angels. Similarly, Zechariah had a sense of the presence of a spirit which he called the angel Gabriel. He was very frightened by this but the angel assured him there was nothing to fear. Then he gives this very improbable message to Zechariah: God has heard your prayer and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son. You shall give him the name John.

Elizabeth and Zechariah no doubt have stopped praying for a child as they were on in years. Here they were being told that what they wanted was about to happen. I am sure

Zechariah said quietly to himself these two thoughts. First, this is all impossible as we are old; second, why now after all these years of waiting; not the best of times.

God does not always work within our time frame. The angel tells Zechariah that he should be more believing. Then we have Elizabeth hiding herself for five months embarrassed by pregnancy in old age. However, she is thrilled to no longer be barren, the butt of jokes among her associates in the town.

Now we move to the second story: In Elizabeth's sixth month of pregnancy, the angel Gabriel appeared to her cousin, a young woman named Mary. Unlike Elizabeth, Mary was very young, recently betrothed to a man named Joseph. The angel tells Mary that she has been favoured by God. She will give birth to a child and call his name Jesus. But I am not even married, she proclaims, knowing only too well what happens to young women who become pregnant. Surely Joseph will not want to marry her after this episode. The angel tells her about Elizabeth her cousin who is also pregnant and says that for God, nothing is impossible.

Mary runs off to see Elizabeth and they share their stories and wonder at all of this. Mary accepts what God has planned for her and stays on with Elizabeth for three months and leaves before John is born.

Joseph was key to this story as well. The news that Mary was pregnant was not welcome news. However, being a decent man, he determined to separate from her quietly and cancel his pending marriage. God speaks to him and assures him that this is God's will. Joseph agrees to the marriage and waits with Mary for the birth.

Two other aspects within the stories are interesting. After John was born, at the time of his being circumcised, the priests assumed the baby's name would be after the father or grandfather. No, said Elizabeth and Zechariah, his name will be John. People could not believe their ears. Why the name John?

When Mary's baby was born, again all assumed he would be named after the father's family. No, they said, he will be called Jesus. Again, there was disbelief at this change in tradition.

These narratives and the details they relate are interesting to us not only because they are a part of the Christmas story. They are a chronicle of how God operates in ways we rarely expect. God does not follow the order we anticipate nor does he worry about what we believe is the proper way of doing things.

Here we have two women and two men who are central to the tale. One is an older woman who for years has prayed that she might conceive a child. Finally, as she gets older, she no longer hopes, now beyond the child bearing age. Here is God telling her that he has not only heard her cries for a child but has decided to do something about it and grant her request. Now, at my age, is this possible? I have withstood years of taunts from people because I was barren and now I will receive taunts because even though I am too

old to have children, I am pregnant! People will tease Zechariah and me about this. She probably thought: be careful what you wish for!

Zechariah, well known as a priest, comfortable in life, was facing the prospects of fatherhood. Was he prepared for it? Why did God choose now to give them their dream child. Was it not a little late? What did God have in store for this boy? Was Zechariah up to the task of preparing his son for the life ahead?

Mary, just starting out in life, is confronted by the prospect of being with child before she is married. She lived in a society with little tolerance for girls who got in trouble. How was she to tell Joseph to whom she was engaged? What prospects were there for her?

Joseph would have been startled by the prospects. None of this was in his plans when he became engaged to Mary. God had assured him of the importance of what he and Mary were to experience. What was this boy about to be born expected to do? Was he as a father up to the task?

Fascinating that both of these couples were given the names of their child and it was not within their tradition of honouring an ancestor in the naming. What was this new thing that God had in store for them all?

As one rereads these stories and contemplates their meaning, a concept that comes to me is that of something new coming out of something old. Perhaps there is an assumption here that the old order is no longer working and its time for a change, no simple tweaking but a radical change. We need to understand that we must be open to new ways of God's operating among us. Help us O God to stretch beyond our comfort level we cry.

John the Baptist went on to caution the established religious tradition and its leaders not to rely on their lineage or past tradition as the new way emerges. Rather it is time to repent and let go of a way of being that has not embraced a radical new vision of God's kingdom to come. Be open to the movement of the Spirit of God. Listen to what God has to say to us in our time.

All too often, we think we are an open and welcoming people. But are we really? The challenge is to be open to the diversity that exists all around us and to welcome it. When we look at Jesus, we see he was often criticized for this radical welcome to those whom the insiders see as outsiders – we often treat the outsiders suspiciously, fearfully. What are we afraid of? That we might have to change? That we will lose our place? That we will be overlooked?

Maybe these advent stories cause us to think about whom we have not welcomed and to repent our ways as John the Baptist urged. We can not bank on our lineage, our bank account, our colour, our gender – in God's kingdom those things do not count.

Advent, the time we prepare for the coming of the Lord. Like Zechariah, Elizabeth, Mary and Joseph, we have to be prepared for God to summon us to service we had not contemplated. God sees beyond our perceived limitations and calls us to be much more than these weaknesses seem to allow.

Christmas celebrates the birth of our Lord and King Jesus. Let us see this time as a dialogue with God to perceive what he has in store for us. Be still and know that I am God. Take my hand and enter into the future, my future, with courage and excitement.