

A Baby's Kick

A Sermon Expositing Luke 1:39-45

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There's a part of faith that's never been difficult for me and another part that very much has. I realized this recently in conversation during our Wednesday evening time of Faith Formation. "Advent is an apocalyptic season," we were saying with a bit of help from a piece by a colleague and friend, Laura Mayo. She didn't mean, and we didn't mean that the world is set to come to some cataclysmic end. That's not what apocalypse is about in a sacred context. Apocalyptic worldviews like those we find in much early Jewish literature and therefore in some early Christian literature like our gospels, are actually about things being revealed in the world. That's what the word means – a disclosure of something, a revelation. What is being revealed, the ancient texts testify, is that this world is moving, however slowly, however painfully, however grudgingly, toward God's hopes; toward peaceful ends; toward justice for everyone; toward harmony and great joy. This is what has been difficult for me to believe.

That God exists, as the most basic premise in the Christian faith, has never been hard for me to believe. Perhaps that means I've been gifted with supernatural faith, perhaps. But more likely it means that I was brought up in a context that takes the existence of a benevolent, powerful, and wholly other transcendent presence for granted. God's presence in the world is just part of how my mind and heart were formed. But the idea that all of what I see and experience in this world is moving forward, progressing toward God's hopes for the world; that's the part that just seems unbelievable to me. To put that in the terms of this season of anticipation of Christ's arrival; it isn't hard for me to believe that God is out there somewhere, but I find it so very, very hard to trust that God is drawing near to us.

Today is our 93rd Sunday worshiping under some sort of precaution due to a global pandemic and after 93 Sundays we are not encouraged at the state of the struggle against the virus. That seems illustrative of so many other trajectories in our world. Sure, we've had some successes and seen moments we thought we were improving, but discord, distrust, an endless battle for power, willful ignorance, and inequities in our social systems have incapacitated our ability to guarantee health and wellbeing for all people. As it is in our battle for public health, so it is in our struggles for equity for all persons, so it is in our struggle for an end to constant warfare, so it is in our struggle for human rights, so it is in our struggle for decency. You see, that says it all – where I want to be speaking of a struggle for love in the world, I've settled to speak of a struggle for mere decency. The trajectories so often seem backwards to me. I can believe in a God out there somewhere weeping on our account, but I find it hard to believe that God is drawing near.

But it isn't merely the academic that I struggle with. There's more than a proposition about whether God is drawing near at stake here. It's the ordering of my days, the way I shape my life, the risks I choose to take or the safety I choose to seek. If, in fact, God *is* drawing near – if we are moving toward justice for all people, if I am being transformed to live more equitably, if the world before us is a lovelier, kinder place than the one behind us for real then I'm in! I am all in! But what if that isn't the case? What if we buy in all the way to a world more kind, more equitable, more loving and it never arrives? What if we get our hopes up only to find out

Note: Sermon manuscripts are written for the ear rather than the eye. If grammar or punctuation seem unconventional and the meaning unclear, try pronouncing the sentence aloud phonetically.

that God is remote? What if we take risks based on the belief that God is drawing near only to find out God isn't? It isn't just an academic question. I can feel it in my stomach. In one moment I hear those ancient words and I *believe* God is drawing near and then I look into the world and it scares me. OH if it's true, but oh if it isn't.

Friends, Advent – not the season, but the reality is all of these things – questionable/scary/exciting! We have no way of knowing if the thing we hope for is even viable. It is a time of fear and anxiety even amid the excitement of anticipation. If only there were some way we could know and be sure that God is coming like Elizabeth was.

I've intentionally left out a part of the scripture reading from today's lection, but not because it is bad. On the contrary, Mary's Magnificat usually read today is full of wonderful hopes for the world – God lifting up the lowly, setting the captive free, feeding the hungry. It's wonderful! But because of that it often captivates the eye of readers within the prevailing theological viewpoint of churches like ours. I wanted us to see without distraction where that song comes from today. That song is a response to an interaction between Mary and Elizabeth, a relative who Mary has gone to visit. If you're following along in the story you know that Elizabeth, far too old for childbearing, is in fact pregnant with a child who will eventually be known as John and some will call him The Baptist (coincidentally, the same nickname I usually get in ecumenical circles). His role in the Jesus story will be as one who prepares the way for Jesus, but in today's story it's his dear mother who lets us know that God is near, very near. When Mary, carrying Jesus in utero, enters Elizabeth's home, Elizabeth knows. She KNOWS that God is very close at hand, that God has entered the world! And what did that feel like? What was the sensation that gave her hope and great joy!? A baby's kick.

At the approach of Mary, mother of Jesus, the baby within Elizabeth's own womb leapt and she knew. Friends, for stridently obvious reasons I do not know what that sensation is like. I'll never know what it is like to have a child moving, kicking, leaping within me. So for that reason I reached out this week to some of the mothers of our youngest worshipers here at First Baptist and asked them if they would be willing to be vulnerable enough to recount for me what it was like when they first felt the kick of a baby.

You see, my idea (and only preachers have ideas like this, so you'll have to forgive me) was that if the sensation that told Elizabeth God is near was a baby kicking, then perhaps if I understand a bit about what experiencing a baby's kick is like then I might be able to say something about what it's like to know, to KNOW, that God is near. Then some mothers among us started to respond and I swear something leapt within me. There was a part of what they, what you described that is completely foreign to me and I'll just go ahead and say that's just fine by me. I don't really need to know what it feels like to have an alien lifeform inside of me, thank you though, for your descriptions. I don't really care to know either what it feels like to have bubble wrap popping in my abdomen or to wonder for hours where all the gas was coming from only to realize that's actually my child. Really, friends, I'm grateful, but I'll take your word for that.

But then there was something more. Where I *anticipated* reports of the joy and the happiness and the giddiness of the moments of movement by the baby, I didn't fully anticipate something else. Pregnancy, I was forgetting, is a time fraught with worry, with fear – but not only that – it is fear that is brought on exactly because of the potential. Every woman who responded to my admittedly awkward question without exception situated their feelings *about* their baby's movement within the context of worries about their baby's wellbeing and viability. Even in an age when hormonal diagnostics can detect, and medical imaging can show us there's a baby – nothing matches, I'm told, a good swift kick to inspire confidence and unleash joy. That first kick is the moment, says one mother among us, “when it all becomes real.” Another said, “It was incredible joy, the excitement of anticipation.”

But let us not make too much of the magic of the whole thing. Amid the joy of the movement “there were also times,” some said, “when I finally had a moment to relax and get comfortable, there he would be *kicking and moving*.” One mom even ventured to say that as the baby gets bigger near term, “nothing is gentle anymore. That's most likely to prepare you for the fact that nothing will be gentle ever again.”

The kick of a baby – hope that arises from promise, yes, but also from fear and worry and that isn't always comfortable and perhaps reminds you that the times ahead may not always be gentle. These are the things that rushed through the mind and the heart of Elizabeth that caused her to recognize: God has drawn near.

Moms among us, your experience in bearing children is singular. It is unique and it is valued, and nothing I have or will experience can rival it. Thank you for that, and thank you for letting me (and us) hear about your experience. And even so, there is a part of what you've described that I recognize.

The writers of old have said that Advent is apocalyptic. That is, the whole world is pregnant with redemption. God is drawing near. But out of that promise I know I have looked around for signs that it could be true and I've found deadly stillness, no signs of life. And out of that fear I have seen people express kindness to one another, people in power give up that power for the benefit of the powerless, I have seen weapons laid down, I have seen people love one another. Those moments hit like a kick. Not always comfortable, they call me to action of my own and let me know the road ahead may not be gentle, but somehow I know God is near. Amen.