

All in the Family

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Fourth Sunday of Advent
First United Methodist Church

December 23, 2018
Micah 5:1-5b, Luke 1:39-49
San Diego, California

Poem:

On the Mystery of the Incarnation by Denise Levertov

*It's when we face for a moment
the worst our kind can do, and shudder to know
the taint in our own selves, that awe
cracks the mind's shell and enters the heart:
not to a flower, not to a dolphin,
to no innocent form
but to this creature vainly sure
it and no other is god-like, God
(out of compassion for our ugly
failure to evolve) entrusts,
as guest, as brother,
the Word.*

Prayer: *May the words of my mouth and the meditation of all of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O God, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.*

Introduction:

Genesis 4:9: הַשֹּׁמֵר אֶתִּי אֲנֹכִי (English pronunciation: *ha•sho•mer a•csi a•no•csi?*)

This is a most ancient and challenging question for all humankind. It is recorded in Genesis the 4th chapter, 9th verse. *ha•sho•mer a•csi a•no•csi?*

My pronunciation, no doubt, has bruised the Hebrew. I hope I have done no permanent damage! It is a question that waits for our answer. This Advent, in this nation, in our world, in San Diego, here is our question, "*Am I my brother's keeper?*" When asked the whereabouts of his brother Abel, Cain hurls the words back into God's face.

In counterpoise, in Luke's Gospel, we have the exchange between two women – Mary and Elizabeth. Each is pregnant with the answer. Each is carrying God's incarnational response to Cain. They are carrying an answer to the sinful, endemic, selfish proclivities in our human condition.

Mary and Elizabeth are kinfolk – two women, one older, the respectable wife of the priest. The other, her cousin is a young, unmarried girl from the back waters of Galilee. Neither Mary or Elizabeth fit my picture the way I would tell the Christmas story. In the face of social disapproval, they sing beautiful songs.

Walt Wangarin writes of this story: "*Mary, when she heard the news, ran south to a particular province named Judea, to a particular hill and on that hill, to one particular house and particular woman in that house to her friend, her cousin, Elizabeth. "Elizabeth, hello." Just as the angel had greeted Mary, Mary greeted Elizabeth and Elizabeth began immediately to laugh.*"

And just as the angel had sung a celestial song for her, Mary sang a song for Elizabeth. "My soul," sang Mary. "Oh cousin, my soul does magnify the Lord. My spirit rejoiceth in God my Saviour. He is keeping his promise to us. Elizabeth, I'm going to have a baby!"

*So then, in the middle of a gloomy world there were two women, (singing and) laughing. They laughed until they couldn't laugh anymore and then they began to weep for gladness and God looked down from heaven and saw them and God laughed. (From Wangerin, Walter, *The Manger is Empty*.)*

Biblical Scholar Raymond Brown points out the birth narratives in Luke's Gospel contain three of the most famous hymns of Christianity beginning with Mary's *Magnificat* - "My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices." Then, the *Nunc Dimittis*, the hymn Simeon, Elizabeth's husband sings and then the hymn of the angels -- *Gloria, in Excelsis Deo*. In fact, the entire gospel of Luke continues, full of ballads – told and sung.

I encourage you to read Mary's song in the first chapter of Luke, this Christmas. She sings of a world turned upside down – where the human family is rewoven into a kinship network where the lowly are lifted up and the hungry are filled with good things. Mary's song arises from the Biblical call for a time of Jubilee. Her song is a little introduction to the Beatitudes, the blessings, her son would teach in a few years. Here is our introduction to Christmas – Cain's question is answered by with the joy and prophecy of Elizabeth and Mary.

We have heard Bob Wilson's experience this morning. The surprising realization that when one seeks to bless the stranger – it is the giver who is also blessed. I have known others, like Bob. There are many in this church, do you know the story of Gary and Myrna Cox and their befriending a homeless man? It's told in a little book [add title here].

Or, I could tell you of Alberta Dink the violin teacher in her late seventies who decided to teach violin to inner city children. At her funeral a dozen years later over 60 children stood in the chancel of her church and played in her honor – one of those young man was by then in the Detroit Symphony Orchestra. Or, there was Francis Neighbors who lived on a modest income but saw that every child in her congregation received a birthday card each year with a few dollars tucked in to help celebrate.

Christmas is a time for rethinking what we mean by family. There was a little-known phenomenon in many communities in this nation of parents who lost a son on active duty in Vietnam. I knew such a family. Their son was always bringing someone home for dinner. These parents decided the best way to honor him after his death was to frequently welcome a stranger to their table.

Let me close with a recent story of women: Tanuel Major and Grace Imathiu. The Rev. Grace Imathiu is the pastor of our sister congregation in Evanston, Illinois. On November 19th she received word that a woman, simply identified as "homeless," was found bludgeoned to death on the church's doorstep, the outside alcove. Can you imagine? What would we do?

Tanuel Major, 49 years old, had bedded down for the night next to the doorway when she was murdered. The shocked congregation sought to find their way after this tragedy. Pastor Grace, one of the fine preachers in Methodism, was born in Kenya and now pastor of this historic church faced the question, What to do? Unsure, she said, "Violence crossed the line

and showed up in church.” “We are here because Taniel Major was homeless... We are here because homelessness is an affront to human dignity... an affront to God... We are here because Taniel’s story has been woven into our story. We are here because stories wake us up and give us clarity.” She was asking how to join in the song of Mary in this situation?

The congregation organized a memorial service and other actions. It wasn’t too late. They sought to “adopt” themselves into Taniel’s family. Persons from the congregation – trustees, food ministry, educators and more -- were involved. Taniel’s sister came from a distance to one worship service. She spoke, “Taniel was a person – not a homeless person, she was a person.” Afterward, Pastor Grace asked who would sit with the sister, a visitor, more than twenty people left their normal pew perches and joined her. They placed Taniel’s ashes in the church’s columbarium. Imathiu said. “What does this say about God and what does this say about us who are disciples of Jesus? We’re taking it from a very different perspective. This is challenging us to ... open our doors even wider, and to be even more connected and involved with the community of people that are either homeless or face violence.” (Sources: Jonah Meadows, *Patch*, 11/20/18 and Kristina Karisch, *The Daily Northwestern*, 11/25/18)

This is a season when we consider who is in our family, and who is left out – this is a time when folks travel for miles to be with those they love. The middle class and upper middle-class folks in Evanston discovered they had been overlooking family members. These were family members God’s son Jesus was always welcoming to his table.

How far from our front door are unseen members of our family? Well, it’s 590 miles from San Diego to Paradise, California. It’s 2,084 miles from San Diego to Evanston and it’s 17 miles to Tijuana. And, there are some, we call the “homeless,” who live up the hill, a few hundred yards above us. Saint Paul’s answer to Cain’s question is summarized in Romans 7:14, “No one lives to himself.”

Who would believe a pregnant teenager about to give birth, out of wedlock, would bring to the world the Messiah? She heard the word of God and responded – with song and laughter. She gave birth to Jesus, the rebuilders of the human family.

Rachel Farbiarz is an artist, attorney and scholar of Hebrew scriptures. In a commentary on Genesis 4:9. She writes: “The ‘neighbors’ for whom you must care are not only the people around you, but the entirety of this large, unruly human family from which you are a lucky, and burdened, descendent. Each member of this family is your ‘brother.’ And none, therefore, are you free to abandon.”...We are simply not at liberty to allow the gulfs created by national, cultural, linguistic, religious, or racial differences to separate us. Instead, we must step up to this haunting question whenever it is asked and answer resolutely: “I am my brother’s keeper.” (*Becoming Every Brother’s Keeper: All Humanity Descended from One Family*, By Rachel Farbiarz, in *My Jewish Learning*)

AMEN.

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Micah 5:2-5a

5:2 But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days.

5:3 Therefore he shall give them up until the time when she who is in labor has brought forth; then the rest of his kindred shall return to the people of Israel.

5:4 And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God. And they shall live secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth; 5:5 and he shall be the one of peace.

Luke 1:39-45, (46-55)

1:39 In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, 1:40 where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. 1:41 When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit 1:42 and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. 1:43 And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? 1:44 For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. 1:45 And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."

1:46 And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, 1:47 and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, 1:48 for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; 1:49 for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. 1:50 His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. 1:51 He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. 1:52 He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; 1:53 he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. 1:54 He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, 1:55 according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever."