***LET THERE BE…LOVE!***

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Texts: Psalm 89 (selected verses) and Luke 1:26-38

Steadfast love and faithfulness, faithfulness and steadfast love, they are wonderful attributes of a good marriage or good friendship, but they are also wonderful attributes of God that bubble up again and again in those verses from Psalm 89 that we just heard. God’s steadfast love and faithfulness endure from generation to generation. They mark God’s relationship with God’s people and God’s special relationship with God’s anointed one, King David, with whom God made a covenant to establish his royal line forever. It is from David’s royal line that the messiah was to come, a descendant of David who would be the redeemer of God’s people, hence Jesus’ birth in Bethlehem, the city of David. Like the God who made the covenant, steadfast love and faithfulness would mark his life.

In the early first century God’s chosen people still believed in that promise, though they long wondered when it might be fulfilled. It had been centuries since the prophets had spoken of that messiah, centuries since there had been any word from the Lord to inspire their hopes and affirm their faith in the messiah to come. There was no expectation of when God would come, no timeline for the messiah’s arrival – just the prophecy of his coming shrouded in the mystery of faith and the people’s trust in that promise: God’s steadfast love and faithfulness endure forever! Then 2000 years ago, an angel appeared to Elizabeth’s husband Zechariah and then to Mary with a message from the Lord – the prophecy was about to be filled, the messiah was coming soon, in a matter of months – and they had been chosen to be part of God’s plan for his coming.

God chose Elizabeth, a barren old woman, to bear the herald of God’s coming, and God chose Mary, a young virgin, to carry the Son of God. God chose two women,

* one old and one young,
* one long married and one just engaged,
* the old one disgraced because she couldn’t be pregnant; the young one disgraced when she was found to be with child,

God chose those two women to bring about the fulfillment of the promise spoken through Jeremiah. They were ordinary women, even less than ordinary in the eyes of their peers, but God chose them, and made them holy, that is, set apart, for God’s precious purpose, so that two thousand years later we still hear about them and sing about them and offer our praise for their faith and faithfulness.

Elizabeth offers the New Testament’s first confession of faith. When Mary arrived at her home and greeted Elizabeth, the child Elizabeth carried leapt for joy – a sort of prenatal prophecy inspiring Elizabeth not only to call Mary blessed, but also to call her the “mother of my Lord”. In those words, she acknowledged the lordship of Jesus, before he was even born. She dared to believe, not only what God could do in her as the angel said, but also what God would do for all God’s people through the still forming infant she dared to call Lord. We who know his story may be slow to confess our faith out loud, but Elizabeth had no such hesitation, for she could see and feel that the fulfillment of God’s promise was coming; God’s arrival was near. Elizabeth believed – and so did Mary.

In retelling to his congregation the story of the angel’s visit to Mary and the announcement that she would bear the Son of God, Martin Luther added this oft-quoted comment:

*There are three wonders here – one, that God should become man; another, that a virgin should bear a child; and the third, that Mary believed. And the greatest of these is that Mary believed.*

Mary believed, but only after she overcame her fear of the angel and her doubts about God’s calling, as she pondered what it all meant before offering herself to God with these words, “*Let it be with me according to your word*.” In humility she offered to God all that she had and all that God needed – herself.

Mary’s journey of faith in those minutes with the angel is not unlike the journey that many of us take, a journey fraught with doubts and fears, ponderings and struggles. Do not think that you are the only one to have those struggles; do not think that you alone have doubts as to why God would choose you for some divine purpose or even some mundane purpose. Do not think that you are alone in questioning where or when or how, or if, God will act in these pandemic days. Do not think that you are alone in wondering about the miracle of Christmas or in pondering what it meant and what it means. Do not think that you are alone in asking, “how can this be?” for Mary has walked that path ahead of you, and God walks it with you, the God for whom nothing is impossible.

It is a wonder that Mary believed. But it is no less wonderful that you believe, that you too dare to offer to God all that you have and all that God needs, which is yourself. Let it be with you according to God’s word, even if you have not heard the voice of an angel. Let it be with your words and with your actions and with your life, according to God’s word. For if God can use Mary and Elizabeth, God can use you too. In wild and wonderful ways, God can use you.

A young pastor tells the story of his first call to ministry; he was charged to reopen a shuttered church in suburban Brooklyn.[[1]](#endnote-1) The church building had deteriorated over the years, so he and his wife worked hard to repair pews, plaster walls, paint, and do all they could to renovate the old building. Their goal was to have it ready for worship on Christmas Eve; by December 18th they were almost there. Then a driving rainstorm hit and lasted for two days. When the pastor entered the church on December 21st his heart sank. The roof had leaked, causing a large chunk of plaster to fall from the front wall of the sanctuary behind the pulpit. All their work seemed to have been in vain. The pastor cleaned up the mess and headed home, resigned to canceling the Christmas Eve service.

On his way home, he noticed that a local flea market was having a sale for charity. One of the items on display was a beautiful, handmade, ivory colored, crocheted tablecloth with a cross embroidered in the center. It was just the right size to cover the hole in the front wall of the sanctuary. The pastor bought it and headed back to the church. By this time it had begun to snow, and upon arriving at the church, the pastor found an old woman standing at the bus stop outside the church. The next bus would not arrive for 45 minutes, so he invited the woman inside. She sat in a pew as he got a ladder and hangers to hang the tablecloth in the sanctuary over the hole. It fit beautifully.

As he was admiring it, he noticed the woman walking down the center aisle. Her face was white as a sheet. “Pastor,” she whispered, “where did you get that tablecloth?” The pastor explained and the woman then asked him to check the lower right corner to see if the initials EBG were crocheted there. They were. “Those are my initials,” she said. “I made that tablecloth in Austria 35 years ago.” She went on to explain that when the Nazis arrived, she was forced to flee; her husband would follow her the next week. But she was captured, sent to prison, and never saw her husband or home again. The pastor offered to return the tablecloth to her, but she insisted it remain where it was. The pastor drove her to her home on the far side of Staten Island, for the woman was only in Brooklyn for the day for a housecleaning job.

What a wonderful Christmas Eve was celebrated in that church that year! The church was nearly full, and the music and spirit were joyous. At the end of the service, one man from the neighborhood remained behind, sitting quietly in the pew. When the pastor approached, the man asked where he got the tablecloth on the front wall, because it was identical to one that his wife had made years ago before the war when they lived in Austria and how could there be two tablecloths so much alike? He told the pastor how the Nazis came, how he forced his wife to flee to safety, and how he was then arrested and put in prison, never to see his wife or home again. That night the pastor took the man for a ride to Staten Island to the house where he had taken the woman three days earlier. He helped the man climb the three flights of stairs, knocked on the door, and there witnessed the reunion of husband and wife, the greatest Christmas gift he could imagine. It all began with a leaky roof, a flea market tablecloth, a first-time pastor – and God.

Coincidence is often God’s way of working anonymously. With ordinary things and ordinary people at ordinary times, God works wonders. Now maybe you are not called to bear a 21st century John the Baptist, maybe you are not going to carry the Son of God, maybe you are not going to reunite long-lost spouses, maybe no one will even remember what it is that God does through you this day or this month or this year – this odd pandemic year. But even so, let it be with you, according to God’s word. This Christmas, dare to believe the tidings of great joy for all people and offer yourself to God as Mary did. Dare to hope in Jesus the Christ who was born of the virgin Mary and who is surely coming again. Dare to trust in the faithfulness and steadfast love of the Lord, and offer in return your faithfulness and your steadfast love for God. While you hope and wait for his coming, let it be with you, let it be with us, according to God’s word, and according to God’s words – faithfulness and steadfast love! Amen

1. Rob Reid, a True Story, as related in an e-mail shared with me by Melissa Druff. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)