

A Gestating Peace

December 16, 2018

Miriam of Nazareth, if we are honest, appears delusional.

“He has done great things for me?” She’s an unwed pregnant young woman.

His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation? Her country is occupied by a brutal Roman army filled with legionnaires who have no hesitation to rape non-citizens who are their subjects, and no accountability if they did.

Scattered the proud with their conceit? Herod Antipas was the tetrarch of Judea, accountable to the Emperor Augustus. You know him from his role in the death of John the Baptist by beheading—and he reigned for 42 years.

Brought down the powerful from their thrones? Lifted up the lowly? Filled the hungry? On what planet? Miriam of Nazareth seems deluded.

For us, too, God’s promises of peace can seem far away.

Corruption is rampant—have you been following the indictments? Inequality is everywhere—real wages for workers have been flat, or declining, since 1979. So-called militarist “strong men” are in power all over the globe—Putin, Orban, Erdogan. Corporations rule the airwaves—and exploit us. Between the military and the shopping mall, we’re taxed, and we spend, and then we die.

But do not be afraid: peace is gestating. Peace is being born among us. Peace is coming—with joy.

Last Sunday, Pastor Bridget contrasted for us the pax Romana versus the pax Christi. Violent power or force—the power of the Pax Romana or Pax Americana—is very different from birthing power (gestation), the power of the Pax Christi, isn’t it? And given the option, we think we know which one we’d trust in a fight, don’t we?

And yet the late Oxford philosopher, Grace Jantzen, suggested in a series of books that in fact our trust in violent power (force) is a kind of necrophilia. When we trust in force, we trust in death.

Jantzen writes: An “emphasis on violence and death comes at the expense of the physical body in the present (a denigration of the senses, sexuality and sensuality), and thus, establishes a yearning for mystical worlds beyond the here and now.”

Trauma, in other words, turns us inward—to fantasy, away from the body and its fragile yet material and therefore indestructible reality.

In contrast to necrophilia, Jantzen suggests we consider “birthing power.” There is a power in giving birth, isn’t there? I can’t claim to have experienced that power directly, but I was present at the birth of all three of our children, and I can tell you—there’s power in birthing, for sure.

I remember particularly vividly the birth of our third child, our daughter, Rheanne, who celebrated her 26th birthday this past Wednesday, December 12. My wife Lisa and I had hosted the main course of a progressive dinner for theology majors at Valparaiso, where I was teaching at the time. We’d had about 40 over at our home, and then had ended up the night at my colleague Betty DeBerg’s house for dessert. On the way home, Lisa mentioned to me that she was having some contractions.

But this was our third child, so we went to sleep without too much concern. About 5 a.m., Lisa awakened me saying: “Jon, I think this is it. I’m having pretty intense back contractions. I think we should go to the hospital.”

Now, I was an old pro at this giving-birth thing, so while Lisa went into the kitchen on her way to the garage, I stopped off in our bathroom. I washed my face, brushed my teeth, and was combing my hair (I had lots then), when all of the sudden I heard this groaning from the kitchen. I turned my head, and I dropped the comb—and I discovered the source of the groaning was Lisa lying in the fetal position on the floor of the kitchen. I whisked her into the back seat of our minivan, and off we went to Porter Memorial Hospital. My mother-in-law happened to be staying with us at the time, thank God, so our boys were taken care of.

I broke a few speed limits on the way to the hospital. Lisa groaned in the back seat the entire 10-minute drive. I pulled into the ER lot, and sprinted into the lobby through the double doors. “My wife’s in severe labor in the car,” I told the nurse on duty. “Bring a wheelchair right away.” I sprinted back out to the car.

The nurse took her time; I joked later that she stopped to have a cigarette on the way. When she reached the van, Lisa was really agitated. We managed to get Lisa into the wheelchair, but as we were walking through the first set of doors into the ER, she stood up in the wheelchair, and exclaimed: “The baby’s coming! The baby’s coming.”

The nurse—not exactly in tune with the circumstances—shouted: “No! We have to go to delivery!” And she tried pushing Lisa back down into the chair, so strongly that it bruised Lisa’s shoulders.”

But I knew my wife wouldn’t tell a lie, so I had sprinted around to the front of the wheelchair. Lisa again arched her back, and as she was wheeled into the lobby of the ER, she delivered our 5-pound, 3-ounce daughter into the leg of her pink sweat pants. I was there to catch the little squid. I joked later that I’d made more difficult catches in my life, but none more important.

Lisa propped her legs up on the footrests of the wheelchair, and we somehow managed—with me holding still holding Rheanne in my hands through the sweatpants—into one of the ER rooms. We then pulled Lisa’s sweatpants down, and there was my daughter. I was the first to hold her in my hands.

The nurse asked Lisa: “Do you think you can climb up on the gurney?” We both looked at her like she was nuts. “I just gave birth,” Lisa said. “Oh, oh,” the nurse said.

Rheanne wasn't breathing, yet, but by now another nurse had shown up, and she had a little blue syringe. We cleared Rheanne's nose, and she took her first breath.

Between them, the nurses lifted Lisa up on the gurney, me still holding my daughter in my hands. I held her for about ten minutes, watching her breathe, and she gradually turned a beautiful, delightful pink. Eventually, a doctor showed up, clipped the umbilical cord, and then sent us a bill for \$12,000.

Seriously, it was an amazing experience. It's a cliché to call it a miracle, but that's how it felt. Later that morning, as I drove home to check on the boys and tell them the good news that they had a baby sister, while I was stopped at a red light, I held my hands over my head in the Rocky pose and simply shouted: “Who-who!”

Is there power in that experience?

I think that's the kind of power that Mary's song—the Magnificat—reveals to us. Birthing-power. A gestating peace. God's peace that can't be stopped—even, and perhaps especially—by a military empire.

Mary's song is a revolutionary's song. Listen to what she sings, again: “God's arm has shown strength, scattering the proud in the thoughts of their heart. 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.”

This is Mary's vision based on what she felt gestating in her womb. It is a vision of justice. It is a vision where the people who suffer occupation experience peace.

A few years ago, I was speaking at a conference at the Arab American University of Jenin, in Palestine. The day after my talk, a group of us from the conference were invited by one of our hosts, Juana Hanfi, to tour Jenin with her. Juana Hanfi was a recent graduate of the school's peace studies program. She had grown up in Jenin, and lived through the 2nd Intifada in April 2002.

“Here's where the tanks were parked as they lobbed shells down on us,” she calmly reported as we stood on an embankment high above the city. “And here's where the armored bulldozers came down the streets,” she said, “flattening everything in their path,” as we stood in a narrow alley lined with three-story apartment buildings that had since been rebuilt.

Now, such an experience—not unlike the experience of military force that Mary lived with under the Roman Empire—might have turned a person bitter, angry, resentful. But Juana Hanfi, like Mary, found power from her oppression. She chose life.

And that is a subversive choice. Mary chose life. She wasn't delusional. She chose a different kind of power than military force. She chose God. And Mary lived peace, we might say, and in living peace she found joy: she sings! And so can we.

A gestating peace is like that. It's like the power of water—which, while seemingly gentle and placid, can become a torrent of power, washing everything away.

A gestating peace is like that. It's like the power of song; the power of music. Voices lifted together in protest, in solidarity, in triumph.

A gestating peace is like that. It's like the power of sisterhood—Mary and Elizabeth, in solidarity and refusing to accept the terms of Empire.

And yet, we know how this story ends, don't we? And it doesn't seem like a happy ending. Mary's baby, Jesus, hangs on a cross, and his mother is there, according to tradition, watching his humiliation and death.

Feminist theologian Elizabeth Johnson, in a book about Mary titled *Truly Our Sister*, puts it this way. The accounts of Mary witnessing the crucifixion reveal to us how “life given by women's bodies keeps on being taken away by brutality, war, and terrorism.”

And yet—we have this revolutionary song. We have this gospel story. We are still singing songs about Jesus—and who remembers the legionnaires, anymore?

So I guess that means it's up to us to choose, too. We can choose death, destruction, despair. Or we can choose hope, peace, and joy? God offers us the power of a gestating peace.

Let's choose that power together, shall we? And so, let's sing! One opportunity tomorrow night is the Allouez Village Band concert at 7 p.m. at the Weidner Center. Some of us will be there. And at the same time, and in the same spirit, we'll gather here at 7 p.m. for A Jazz Christmas at Union. I promise that service will bring you a smile—the sign of joy.

And maybe next year we can get the Allouez band here—or at least coordinate our timing! In any event, you have a choice of beautiful events for tomorrow to hear anew Mary's song. And just like Mary had a choice about how to respond to the oppression that was all around her, we have a choice before us too, every day, in every way.

We can choose God's way. We can choose life. And, now, we can sing. Amen.

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