

LETTING GO

A SERMON PREACHED AT SAINT JOHN'S PARISH, DECEMBER 18, 2005
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Gospel text appointed for the Fourth Sunday of Advent Season, Year B

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God." Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her. Luke 1:26-38

"Don't be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. ... for nothing is impossible with God." Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."

National Public Radio has a Saturday radio broadcast game show where contestants are asked if they can identify who said what in the news that week. It's called, "Wait, Wait, Don't Tell Me." Okay, that's the format, and here's our own little game show question of the week:

What now-famous person spoke these words last week after a newsworthy event made all the major networks and newspapers: "It's a miracle, just a miracle, especially in the holidays now, and it's a beautiful thing."

Give up? That would be Felix Vasques, age 39, the housing authority cop from the Bronx, who was said to have made the catch of a lifetime when a screaming mother tossed her 3-week old infant out the window of a burning third story apartment. Since that fateful moment, newscasts all over the country have repeated run the tape in slow-mo from the video surveillance camera affixed to the building as it just happened to catch the dramatic split-second event.

Apparently, the fire broke out in the apartment kitchen and left the mother, and her newborn trapped by smoke and flames against the window. Later, the mother reportedly said she'd prayed, "God, please save my son," adding, "I prayed that someone would catch him and save his life."

Meanwhile down below, Felix Vasques -- who coincidentally also happens to be a father of three himself, as well as the catcher on his local baseball team -- said he didn't know what the woman was holding out the window until after she finally let go of what she was holding and let the baby drop. He says he caught the soot-covered infant "like a football" and "just in time," then quickly blew air into the tiny lungs in order to get the infant breathing again. Then he modestly summed it all up with, "It's a miracle, just a miracle, especially in the holidays now, and it's a beautiful thing."

Well, a miracle-baby story seems to always surface in the news close to the Christmas holiday season, doesn't it? Usually it's the cabbie that delivers the baby on the gridlocked streets of a cold and otherwise-heartless metropolis before the birth mother in labor can reach the Mercy Hospital ... something like that.

This time, for a split-second last Wednesday in Gotham City, a housing authority cop and amateur baseball catcher got to play Santa, and give an hysterical young mother the only gift she could have ended up wishing for this Christmas. He gave her her son's life back, when it was all but snuffed out on a cold, gray and dreary day in the kind of place one might describe as bleak, drab, or humble.

So, it's a manger story. It's a Christmas story, complete with a poor Madonna and child, caught in desperate circumstances; where the little tragedies and troubles of otherwise-insignificant lives seem to happen way too soon after the miraculous joy of bring a spanking newborn into this world.



Then, in a split second, that miracle of life is trumped by the need of another unreflective act of a catcher making the homerun play his own little life, and giving life back again.

It makes me think of that first Christmas story, where the Magi think twice about turning in the king in swaddling clothes to a treacherous Herod; or the insignificant character Joseph and his dream to flee the impending slaughter of the innocents in order to save his newborn son.

But for a poor mother from the Bronx and her infant son, between the miracle of birth three weeks ago that for the most part went unnoticed by the world, and the miraculous save three weeks later that became the feel-good story on the six o'clock news, there was the desperate, terrified, prayerful and plea-full act of a young mother letting go of her child. That's the story, within the story.

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Every parent of every child comes to eventually know and understand this act of letting go. The post-partum blues isn't something suffered only by new mothers in the weeks and months following childbirth. It's something all parents experience, often repeatedly. And, it doesn't necessarily end with the conclusion of formal childrearing, when the offspring reaches adulthood.

One of the first times I can remember my mother letting go was the day she allowed her third grader to cross busy West Main street after school by myself so I could go to Whitey's drug store for candy once each week with my 5-cent allowance. That may have been the first time, but it wasn't the last. Fifty-some years later her worrying and wrestling to let go doesn't seem to have ended if she hears exhaustion in my voice, or the hint of any problem or irritation when we talk on the phone.

So, the other day I call my 88-year old mother to ask how she's doing. She has three children, the two oldest now in their sixties. At nearly 58, I'm still the "baby" of the family. The basic conversation hasn't changed much since I left home decades and decades ago now. She wants to know how life is treating me: "A mother always worries, you know," she recites.

Then, in the next breath, she wants or needs the reassurance that she has allowed her children to live their own lives. The litany continues: "You know I always tried to not be one of those controlling mothers who didn't let their children grown up and make their own choices, and I hope I succeeded ..."

Sometimes the tone in her voice when she's uses that word "choice" sounds a little pained, like she's biting her tongue to keep from using that other word parents can hardly resist, right?

She doesn't use the other word, "mistakes." Whether it's true or not, I occasionally think I can hear it in her voice; and probably because of their words I find myself carefully picking and choosing myself when I speak with my own children; as if I'm treading through a familial minefield.

It's hard to let go. And it's a challenge that's not just for those who are parents, but anyone who has known and held a bond of life's affections. It's hard to let go of things we love, of ones we've loved, and hold most dear; as if they were the sum of life itself for us.

Much of grief work, for example, is learning the art and craft of letting go. It's about letting go of something that once was, and is no more; or, more pointedly, letting go of someone who once was, and is no more. It's about accepting the sometimes harsh and painful reality that things have changed, life has changed; at least the life we once lived, the one we once thought we knew and had a handle on; only to find we're now living another life. Letting go is hard work.

And sometimes there are things that are even harder to let go of than those dear ones we love and would long to have and to hold forever, but are dead and gone. Instead there are sometimes things that are toxic and deadening in our lives, but to which we cling nonetheless.

We know it's sometimes it's harder to let go of old anger, grudges, resentments or disappointments; old wounds we lick and savor sometimes with a sense of righteous indignation, and cling to as if life depended on it. When, of course, just the opposite is true; when letting go is the first act of repentance, say, of turning things around, of turning ourselves around. Letting go opens the possibility (and the promise, if one is a person of faith who trusts in this gospel truth) of healing and reconciliation, restoration, wholeness, holiness and health.

This act of letting go is the ritualized act the Church practices, having recognized this indigenous part of our human nature long ago; so that we make a deliberate, periodic pilgrimage through such seasons of penitence as Advent or Lent, as preparation for the birthing and re-birthing of life, new life, and the reminder of the "resurrected life" of which we are already a living part.

This letting go, this radical, sometimes desperate act of relinquishing one's clinging, grasping hold on that which eventually eludes us anyway, is an ultimate act. Sometimes it is an act of despair, sometimes one of faith, and sometimes both. And it makes me think of that first manger story as a radical, ultimate story of letting go.

Luke spins this tale: A young Jewish peasant girl named Mary, living in a backwater town of a dusty province of the Empire, receives a visit from an angel. She is betrothed in marriage to a peasant named Joseph. He's a nobody himself, except Luke tells us he is somehow a descendant in the ancient line of the great King David.

That little fact alone, given in this one sentence in this gospel tale, tells us there is something startling and significant afoot: Empire (Rome) and Kingdom (God's reign) are being juxtaposed in the most unlikely place on earth, with the least likely characters either Rome nor Jerusalem could have ever imagined. And with that kind of setup something's gotta give. Or rather, someone's gotta give. And, as the story goes, it's gotta be Mary.

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"Greetings, favored one!" the angel says.

"Uh-oh," she says, at least to herself. Luke puts it much more delicately, saying she was "much perplexed and pondered these things, wondering what sort of greeting this might be." But I betcha it was something muttered under her breath, that was less genteel, meek and mild, trying to find out what the divine visitor wanted from her. She doesn't have to wait long to find out.

"Don't be afraid, Mary," the shimmering apparition proclaims, "for you have found favor with God."

Now, if this young Jewish peasant girl had heard any of the great stories passed down by her people from one generation to another – about how this God of theirs works with those whom this God favored – she had every right to be afraid. And with good cause, when Gabriel announces something as outrageous as the news of her imminent immaculate conception by the "power of the Holy Spirit that will overshadow her, ..." etc.

I suspect there's at least a reasonable probability Mary was less concerned about understanding the inexplicable biological phenomenon about to take place, and instead already worrying more about her child's future well-being; about him "reigning over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." What kinds of future joys and sorrows would any earthly mother be expected to bear with such news? Could she already sense what the days ahead would hold for her infant son, those days of gold and myrrh?

In response to the most outrageous announcement a mother-to-be could hear, Mary's humble reply is "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." She releases her hold on all her little hopes and dreams, and entrusts herself utterly to God's bittersweet promise. Before she has ever held her newborn child in her arms, she lets go.

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Last Wednesday, Felix Vasques, a housing authority cop from the Bronx, made his own startling announcement, as if he were the archangel Gabriel himself: "It's a miracle, just a miracle, especially in the holidays now, and it's a beautiful thing."

The Christmas story, of course, is a birth story. As such, it is a story that is common enough, as well as miraculous enough; like every child born to every parent on earth.

The Christmas story, of course, is also a story ultimately of new birth, new life, new life in God, everlasting life in God.

And between the human story of miraculous birth and the divine story of what we call eternal life is the story of a young Mary – as is sometimes said -- letting go, and letting God. Instead of a story of merely perplexed, fearful and frightened clinging, it is instead a story of letting go; and ultimately entrusting to God that which we cannot – in the end – trust to anyone or anything else.

Amen. jib+