

“The ‘Real’ Story”
December 24, 2006

Micah 5:2-5a
Luke 1:39-45

As child, I loved thunderstorms. Whether they were in the panhandle of Florida, in the northwestern part of Georgia, or high in mountains of northern New Mexico, I loved thunderstorms. Those unpredictable flashes of light, the rumble of thunder that could shake the house, and the thrill of counting, “One thousand one, one thousand two, one thousand three,” to measure how far away the lightning had struck. I was enthralled, enchanted, thoroughly “wowed.” A combination of innocence, ignorance, and openness left me unafraid of the power of lightning and always excited when a new thunderstorm started brewing. These things were full of mystery and full of sublime pyrotechnics.

Then one day in junior high school, a science teacher came along and *explained* lightning. Lightning, she said, was a stream of electrons. She explained, in ways I no longer remember, the specifics of how this stream of electrons develops and creates such a powerful electric charge. Although I’ve forgotten the details, the teacher was quite clear, and I remember not doubting anything she said about what lightning “really” was.

I wasn’t doubtful; I was devastated. I felt as though I’d lost something very precious. Actually, I felt as though someone had *taken* that something precious from me. I felt like someone had *stolen* it from me. Before this “theft,” thunderstorms and especially lightning were a source of wonder and awe and excitement. After that “thieving” science lesson, though, the magnificent, marvelous phenomenon of lightning was nothing more than a flashy, noisy stream of electrons.

I’m really too embarrassed to admit how many years ... how many *decades* ... I stayed mad at that science teacher. I stayed mad, and I stayed convinced that something had been taken from me. I stayed strangely convinced that it was no longer OK to think of lightning and thunderstorms as enthralling, enchanting, and utterly awesome creations. Finally, thank God – and I mean that literally – I realized that, whether or not we can understand how they develop and how they work, I can still love thunderstorms as the amazing, astounding, incredible creations that they are. So instead of finally getting around to forgiving that junior high science teacher, I realized she’d done nothing for which she needed forgiveness. What can I say? Sometimes wisdom and maturity come slowly, painfully slowly.

I found myself reminiscing about my struggle with that science lesson 35 years ago after reading and praying with this morning’s reading from the Gospel of Luke.

In the reading, a young woman who is pregnant travels to see her relative, an old woman who is also pregnant. It is a story of two women brought together by the mystery of sacred life and blessing. Both of these women’s pregnancies are surprises; both are holy as all of life is holy.

“When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry ... ‘[A]s soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she

who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.”

For me, this is a story of mystery and power, just as lightning and thunderstorms were about mystery and power for me as a child. Luke’s story of Elizabeth and Mary is a story of the miracle of life itself, a story of the blessing of being able to recognize the presence of God within one another.

And into this story comes a latter day version of my junior high school science teacher. Into this story and our relationship with it comes Bishop Jack Spong and something he said during the Living the Questions series several of us in the congregation have just finished. In that program, Bishop Spong informed us that “fetuses in Elizabeth’s womb don’t leap to salute fetuses in Mary’s womb to prove that Jesus was greater than John the Baptist.” Quite matter-of-fact, an assertion of common sense. Not dismissive exactly, but perhaps a bit impatient. These sorts of things simply don’t happen.

But Spong isn’t trying to drain the beauty and mystery out of this part of the Christmas story any more than my science teacher was trying to deprive me of joy and wonder as I experienced thunderstorms. He’s not urging anyone to toss the gospel stories about Jesus’ birth into the trash can as falsehoods and silly fantasies. He urges us to see at least some of the larger context in which these stories developed – and that context did include disputes about whether John or Jesus was more powerful or was “the one” to follow. *And then*, he encourages us to go deeper and to come to know these stories as stories that are “in touch with a powerful and profound truth.”

So what is the powerful and profound truth with which this morning’s gospel reading is in touch?

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