

The Reverend Dr. Randall K. Bush
December 20, 2009 (Fourth Sunday of Advent)
Luke 1:35-45
“An Advent Quartet: Luke’s Blessing”

A waltz is a sneaky thing. Our world seems built for music in 4/4 time – four beats to a measure; nice and symmetrical, perfect for walking or marching in an orderly left-right-left-right rhythm. But you can’t march to a waltz. You can only dance to it – step, step, close. It moves you in ways you wouldn’t normally move, and invariably carries you to places you hadn’t expected to visit. Imagine how boring life would be without waltzes - how orderly and mundane and predictable. It would be a life without surprises, without wonder, without the blessings of grace. Imagine that...

Mary and Elizabeth stand center stage in this opening part of Luke’s gospel. The angel Gabriel is somewhere in the background, while off in the wings are two silent men – Joseph, Mary’s fiancé who never speaks a word in this gospel, and Zechariah, Elizabeth’s husband, who lost his ability to speak when he foolishly questioned the angel Gabriel. It is one of the few times in the entire bible in which two women talk to one another with no men around. That in and of itself is a refreshing change. On the surface, the conversation they share could be characterized as straightforward and pious: Mary was visited by Gabriel, and a short time thereafter she traveled to her kinswoman Elizabeth, who is pregnant with child and who extends a blessing upon Mary as soon as the two of them meet. But if you think about it, this series of events actually defies expression in mere words. A young girl is visited by an angel, becomes pregnant with the Son of God, and then visits her barren cousin who is also miraculously pregnant and whose baby leaps in utero when the two of them meet. This is not something as simple as 1,2,3 – unless you shift the emphasis a bit and say it is as simple as 1-2-3, 1-2-3 (waltz rhythm).

Let’s start with Mary. This young girl was told that the power of the Most High would overshadow her and she would become pregnant. What must Mary do next? Well, she had to have two very awkward conversations. One was with her parents, with whom she lived; and one was with Joseph, to whom she was promised in marriage, which in that day and age meant she was in many ways already his wife. Let’s assume that those talks went well – that her family and Joseph knew Mary to be virtuous and she was not lying about the angel’s visit or the miraculous pregnancy. At some point, though, she decided she had to leave; she had to get up and go visit Elizabeth. Because if Elizabeth truly was six months pregnant, then that part of the angel’s announcement would be verified. And if one part was true, then perhaps it all really was true. So Mary marched down the road to Elizabeth’s house – 1,2,3,4 – march, march, march, march. A logical, reasonable progression of events played out nicely in 4/4 time.

Now if you were to think of this story as if it were a ballet, I would suggest that as soon as Mary and Elizabeth met, their theme music would change from 4/4 time to a waltz in three-quarters’ time. I picture a waltz occurring between these two women, because in that moment, Elizabeth was the perfect companion for Mary. She alone could talk to

Mary about angels, surprise pregnancies, and the workings of God's Holy Spirit. She alone had at least some sense of what Mary was going through.

And best of all, this conversation with Elizabeth answered Mary's questions as quickly as 1-2-3. First, Elizabeth began by calling Mary "blessed among women," just as Gabriel had also begun by calling her "favored one" of the Lord. Second, Elizabeth called her "the mother of my Lord," exactly as Gabriel had told how she would give birth to one "who will be called the Son of the Most High." And the third point is the most dramatic one. When Mary had her conversation with the angel Gabriel, it ended with her making a statement of faith: "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word" (Luke 1:38). Gabriel didn't answer Mary then. The angel didn't say, "Great!" or "Let's shake on it and call it a deal." The angel simply left. But Elizabeth ends up answering Mary's final remark. Mary had said, "Let it be with me according to your word," to which God through Elizabeth replied, "Blessed is she who believed there would be a fulfillment of what the Lord spoke to her." Mary came to Elizabeth; she saw that the angel's words were true; and the conversation ended with a blessing to calm her young soul. Whatever rational questions Mary had, 1-2-3-4, were transformed when she waltzed with Elizabeth, 1-2-3, and saw things in an entirely new light. Trust me - that's the way God works.

Are there parallels to this in our own lives? Yes, of course there are. But it first means we have to stop marching along in 4/4 time; we have to stop being so precise and logical and rational in how we look at the world and remember how many, many ways we learn things in life. And then ask ourselves: Why wouldn't God use all these opportunities for learning to get through to each of us?

Let me give a medical example of what I'm talking about. What's one of the first things doctors do when they give a physical? They pull out their stethoscope and they listen to our hearts. In official medical jargon this is called a "cardiac auscultation" in which the physician listens to verify the proper closure of the atrioventricular valves at the beginning of systolic contraction and the closure of the pulmonary valves at the beginning of diastolic contraction. However, in laymen's terms, the physicians use their stethoscopes to make sure our hearts are going *lubb-dub, lubb-dub*. Now how silly does that sound? A trained professional listening to "lubb-dubs." This is not an event involving precise measurements, hard data, or analyzable lab specimens. The doctor just hears a sound – a rhythm – a (hopefully) steady beat. Yet in listening to "lubb-dubs," doctors can tell if your heart is healthy or not, if the valves are working or if there are problems that could suddenly end your life if not addressed.

Now consider this relation between fancy medical data and doctors listening to your heartbeats of "lubb-dub" and think about the parallels in your faith life. Often in life we cry out "Where is God in my time of need? Why doesn't God help me out?" It's a very human and understandable cry. The problem, though, is that we define things from our own perspective and rationally lay out the options, pick the best solution for us and then shout to the heavens, "Why aren't you doing what I ask?" I am hungry; Lord bring me food. I need work; Lord, cause a job to appear. I'm sick; remove this illness from me.

We find ourselves in A; we then determine the answer for us is B – so we pray, Lord, bring me B. But we forget that often the reason we get into A and then think we need B is because we keep defining life in terms of A's and B's. We see things from our limited and sinful perspective; and we look for easy answers that suit us best. Yet our perspective is not God's perspective. As it says in Hamlet, "there are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy." Faith calls us to step out of our lockstep marches and let the Spirit lead us in a new way, in a new dance that surprises us and insists that things need not stay as they are, especially where there is brokenness and emptiness and fear in our daily lives.

This is hard for me to explain because by definition explanations are shaped by logic and order; and what God offers is beyond logic and earthly order and all such categories. By faith and God's grace, we learn to encounter the world differently. Like a doctor who masters the anatomical terms and yet still appreciates the complex beauty in the heart's childlike melody of *lubb-dub, lubb-dub*. Like people of faith who trust that the world is full of things beautiful and inspiring and healing, which our rational sight seldom sees except occasionally from the corner of our eyes. Like someone who stops marching through life in 4/4 time and begins, by grace, to waltz and dance.

I am convinced that this is a central tenet of our faith. If it were not so, why in the world did God choose to become incarnate in a baby born to a young girl 2000 years ago? Why does so much of this story involve minor characters suddenly thrust center stage in the biggest drama of life? There on the margins of life we see Mary and Elizabeth waltzing in joy as they share their stories with one another. Then on come the lowly shepherds as the first worshipers of the Christ child. The trial of Jesus Christ occurred not before Caesar in Rome, but before a cantankerous minor prefect in Jerusalem named Pilate. And at the end of the story, the resurrection itself was revealed early one morning to a group of women, who waltzed in joy and disbelief with the news that he who was dead is now alive. 1-2-3, 1-2-3. Far too often we think about these things as being exceptions to the rules – isolated incidents in which the not-powerful and not-famous had a brief moment in the spotlight. What if the exceptions are the rule and we've got it all backward? That maybe this whole human saga isn't about the powerful and mighty and famous, but about Mary and Elizabeth and you and me and all our private, wonderful little waltzes.

Whenever you find yourself in hard spots, in Situation A's of life, pause before leaping ahead to define the answers, to name for God what Situation B must look like. There is always more involved in any equation than what you might think. For we worship a God who knows us well and with whom all things are possible; a God who came to us and still comes to us, who offers enough information to ease our minds yet still calls us into a dance that moves us in ways we wouldn't normally move, and carries us to places we never expected to visit. Maybe the music of heaven is a waltz after all – 1-2-3, 1-2-3. Blessed is she and he who believes that there will be a fulfillment of what has been promised by the Lord.

AMEN