

A Mother's Deep Prayer

Luke 1:46-56

As many of you know, Wendy and I are expecting our first grandchild in the coming days—the first of twelve we've asked for. In all fairness, we should say, we had little to do it, so we can't truly make this claim. More properly, it should be said that, in the coming days, our daughter, Jenny, and her husband, Jon, will deliver their firstborn—a son, as it turns out to be, who shall be named—not Jesus or Santa or even Paul—but Grant Henry Ney.

Since this event has been anticipated for much of the past year by many in her extended family, we all have agreed that should she not give birth in the coming week, then on Christmas morn we will gather at their house to surround Jenny with a big group hug to squeeze the little squirt right out of her! That's family togetherness at its finest!

Honestly, we have full confidence that Jenny will deliver on her due date of December 21, because this is Jenny we're talking about. She's one of the most organized and determined planners I have ever known. Nothing falls to chance. She conceived on the Spring Equinox, announced it to the world at the Summer Solstice, had her baby shower at the time of the Autumn Equinox, and will deliver this Thursday on the Winter Solstice. It's uncanny! If she pulls this off, we'll start calling her Mother Nature. Even the universe follows her command! Jesus said he wants to hire Jenny to schedule his Second Coming.

I, of course, am looking forward to meeting my new grandson so I can bond with him. There's a lot of family competition as to who will be the favorite grandparent, or uncle or aunt. So, to ensure that one of first words he utters out of his mouth refers to Wendy and me, I've made it easy. I

figure if Wendy is called, Nana, then my name should be Banana—an appropriate derivative which surely will be uttered before Grandpa, or Grandma, or Auntie Bren. As I see it, in his first six months when he babbles to his parents that he wants to go see Nana and Banana, we'll get first dibs on taking care of him.

Well, aside from all our pre-natal reverie, there is some underlying angst about welcoming a new life into the human rat race, especially in 2017. Namely, the craziness we experience from day to day and week to week, it's a bit sobering to imagine being born into this mess and having a life that could span the next eighty or ninety years. In what condition will the world be at the end of this century? What will happen over the course of his lifetime? Do we even want to know, lest it not be good news?

These are the sort of haunting concerns lingering in the hearts of any parent or grandparent when a child is born. The excitement and anticipation are offset by what a newborn may have to encounter and endure through the course of a lifetime. It's not as if worry is an overriding issue, just the natural angst in the back of one's mind in assuming responsibility for bringing a life into this world.

There's justification for this concern. We look ahead and wonder, for instance, if climate change will become the defining crisis of the coming decades, resulting in a deadly march toward higher global temperatures with a constant increase in the intensity of storms, or raging fires, or rising seawater. The prospects for irreversible damage heighten every year.

When that doesn't haunt us, then we are anxious about the growing militarization of the planet, where weapons of mass destruction are more widespread today than at any other time—a period in history where a sudden misunderstood tweet could provoke a devastating nuclear holocaust

threatening the survival of the entire human race. Or we worry about the widening gap between the rich and the poor and the prospects for social and economic unrest and upheaval, in a society that already is overwhelmed by gun violence.

So many factors lie outside of our control as responsible guardians of young lives. What kind of world will our children or grandchildren experience? Are they doomed to live on a planet that will become less and less habitable? Some days, it appears absolutely frightening.

But then, other thoughts and dreams come to mind which counter these fears and are just as profound—powerful enough to ward off all the worries of the heart. What if our grandchild grows up to be one who contributes to the improvement of the planet and the better welfare of human civilization? What if he matures into brilliance and sober conscience to take on the challenges that previous generations have left unsolved? Why can't he be part of a new commitment among his generation to heal what is broken, to restore what has been lost, and to repair the damage that has been done, and to quiet the angry spirit of human evil? Is that not just as possible? In fact, is it not likely, because future generations will not merely resign themselves to despair, but will collectively do whatever they must to survive? I want to believe this more than anything. I know I am not alone.

I'm reminded of the poet, William Butler Yeats, who penned a prayer for his daughter following her birth a century ago. The world she was entering had been devastated by the first World War and Irish Rebellion. Criminal chaos and militant terrorism threatened Europe, along with the rise of communism in Russia, and the future seemed to offer little in the way of innocent hope. In 1919, he wrote "A Prayer for My Daughter,"

published adjacent to his far more notable poem, “The Second Coming.” The foreboding gloom of the latter work carried over into his more intimate reflections of his infant daughter.

Once more the storm is howling, and half hid
Under this cradle-hood and coverlid
My child sleeps on...
And for an hour I have walked and prayed
Because of the great gloom that is in my mind.

I have walked and prayed for this young child an hour
And heard the sea-wind scream upon the tower,
And under the arches of the bridge, and scream
In the elms above the flooded stream;
Imagining in excited reverie
That the future years had come,
Dancing to a frenzied drum,
Out of the murderous innocence of the sea.¹

His thoughts searched inward to how she could prepare in order not to suffer from the vanity and foolhardiness of his era.

May she be granted beauty and yet not
Beauty to make a stranger’s eye distraught,
Or hers before a looking-glass, for such,
Being made beautiful overmuch,
Consider beauty a sufficient end,
Lose natural kindness and maybe
The heart-revealing intimacy
That chooses right, and never find a friend.²

After citing the desire for her to have a strong mind, but not at the expense of hateful opinion, as well as his hope that she’d be rooted in a stable home to flourish in her innocence, he ended the prayer, as an Irish father would:

And may her bridegroom bring her to a house
Where all’s accustomed, ceremonious;
For arrogance and hatred are the wares
Peddled in the thoroughfares.
How but in custom and in ceremony

¹ William Butler Yeats, “A Prayer for My Daughter,” *The Collected Poetry of W.B. Yeats*, MacMillan, 1956 ed., pg. 185.

² *Ibid.*, pg. 186.

Are innocence and beauty born?

In his heart's desire, through the accustomed ways of civil decency and moral character, one could prepare for a world that otherwise could well harm the soul.

I don't think Yeats' perspective was particularly unique, in his time or ours. Parents and grandparents obviously want to protect the vulnerable children they love—equipping them, as they can, to survive in what can be a harsh and cruel world. Many of us have uttered a similar deep, and at times desperate, prayer for the ones in our care, with hope that God would shield them from the worst effects of what might unfold. This is a natural maternal and paternal response to concerns and worries about what children may face in a future beyond our own time. We can't control what happens on the larger scale, so we focus on the part over which we have some direct influence. The concern doesn't diminish when they've grown up and are out on their own, as many of us know.

Still, our worries may be overblown or even unwarranted. Over the course of time many things change and typically for the better. The great evils of one day often loom for a while, generating fear and concern, but then are addressed in a concerted and effective way, or they recede into history out of their own doing, or are replaced with other worries and concerns that rise up at a later time. This is how the history of civilizations play out. Generation after generation usually finds a way to meet the challenges of their time to improve the conditions of the world for those who follow them. That's not always true, but this expectation is also realistic and justified.

Perhaps the proof of this hope is embedded in our common outlook. Despite the worries we possess, most would not want to bring children into

the world at any other time than in the present, because we have gained many benefits, comforts, and protections to our health and welfare that didn't exist in the past. On many levels, human progress has improved the odds of our survival and increased the status and value of people from all walks of life. Yes, there are many things that need to be addressed and improved, but do we not live in the best of all possible worlds (so far anyway) and certainly compared to the past? Is there another time and place in history where any of us would prefer to be?

Children, of any generation, keep us pointed toward the future to what is yet possible. That's why they are the hope of the world; as much as we may fear their lives could be at risk or suffer harm, we also know they are the ones who will live into the hope that guides and empowers their lives to address the challenges of their time to make their contribution to improving life on this planet. The promise of a new generation brings with it the hope of a better world.

In many respects this is the hopeful, joyful spirit inherent to Mary's Magnificat—our Advent text for today. It's about the hope found in this birth to be, which is reminiscent of Hannah's prayer in I Samuel 2. Mary's song is a declaration of startling grace to a world no less frightening than ours and certainly acquainted with great human suffering.

More specifically, Mary's song is a hope from a mother for her child born in poverty and into a world defined by the ruthless powers of Rome and their local tyrant, King Herod. Galilee was a cruel environment for those living under occupation—not all that different from what we see today in Palestine. The ruling powers were not lenient with their control or generous with their mercy. Herod was paranoid, a brutal dictator over the region, who fancied building monuments to his own glory and fortresses to

protect his wealth and power. The Marys of the Galilean world wouldn't have mattered to someone like Herod; they were nameless and meaningless unless they gave birth to trouble.

Luke, knowing the end of the story, put into the mouth of this young woman the prophetic claim that God was about to make trouble. It was a mother's deep prayer for her child's future and what God was about to do through him. Mary was coming from the context of nearly every Jewish mother of her time, fearful of what could happen to her children in a brutal land. But her song brought joy for what God was about to make happen.

Our friend, Nancy Sehested, offers a stirring rendition of the Magnificat that gets to the heart of this poor mother's song, and to the heart of every mother's earnest prayer for her children:

I'm overflowing with thanks to God.
I'm dancing to the song of God.
God chose me, of all people.
I'm blessed beyond words.
God has done great things for me. Just look at me!
God's mercy is endless.
I hope my baby knows such mercy.
I hope my baby knows a world full of God's creating,
Where the high and mighty and proud are put in their
place—a place right alongside all of us.
I hope my baby knows a world where tyrants and terrorists
become harmless,
And those whose lives never mattered, all matter.
I hope my baby knows a world where the hungry have a
taste of plenty,
And the over-stuffed know the gnaw of hunger.
I hope my baby knows a world where mercies pile
Higher than cruelties,
And where the promise of peace cascades through every
generation. ³

³ Nancy Sehested, "All's Wild with the World," www.prayer&politiks.org, Dec. 7, 2016.

The hopes and fears of all the years that radiate forth from a mother's deep prayer give voice to all the generations who look to the future unfolding in their children.

The most hopeful demonstration of defiance in the face of despair is to bring forth new life out of the womb to rise up and stake claim on the future—to bring a child into the world and rebel against all the problems, challenges, and obstacles that threaten their existence or progress! A new generation is what refutes the domination of evil that seeks to suppress justice in life or the inherent spirit of good in every human.

In Martin Luther King's words, "the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice." Yes, history requires a patient heart and soul, but in time, life will progress to be more just, more equitable, and restorative of the best within us—why? because this is the divine plan and promise built right into our souls. It always has been. Despite what some may say, there's nothing destructive about God's dream for earth. It's the dream inherent to the redemptive spirit that Jesus helped to unleash and still represents through each generation giving birth to another. And the course of every step of human progress is what makes heaven and earth absolutely rejoice.

Like the 40 weeks of pregnancy—the nine months of developing expectation, joy is experienced proleptically in our imaginations, dreaming of what this new world will be like. And should we witness hope being realized in one single life or in the transformation of entire societies—there is joy rising up from deep within us. It is present when the birth of a child brings forth a new day, a new way to love one another, and a new hope for tomorrow.

This is eternity's messianic hope—the redemptive expectation—embodied in joy of a newborn child, who inspires the best to well up from within us, as well as the imaginative dream for what will yet be.

The Rev. Dr. Paul C. Hayes
Noank Baptist Church, Noank CT
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