

“The Risk of Birth”
I Samuel 1:20-28; Matthew 1:18-25
Baptism of Oliver Reid Blackburn
December 22, 2019

Years ago, when my wife and I were expecting our firstborn, we were given a picture of an infant with the caption, “A baby is God’s way of saying the world should go on.” Today as we consider the birth of the Christ-child, as well as the baptism of Oliver Reid Blackburn, and as we recall the scripture lesson of Hannah dedicating her child Samuel to God’s work, we might think about what God might be saying, what God could possibly mean, on the occasion of the birth of a child - any child.

Some of you might be familiar with the Christian writer Madeleine l’Engle. Besides her many novels, such as “A Wrinkle in Time,” she wrote the following lines:

That was no time for a child to be born
In a land in the crushing grip of Rome.
Honor and truth were trampled by scorn -
Yet here did the Savior make his home.
When is the time for love to be born?
The inn is full on the planet earth,
And by greed and pride the sky is torn -
Yet love still takes the Risk of Birth.

The birth of love is indeed a risk - for the mother, who at best endures pain, at worst risks her health and even her life. There is also more risk - for the family, who often already have meager resources, and now has another mouth to feed, another life to care for. There is a risk for a society and a world that grows and grows by leaps and bounds, and some wonder whether the time will come one day when our planet cannot hold another life. Yes, there are many risks - but the birth of another child is also a risk for Someone else: it is a risk for God.

To many of us, that might sound nonsensical. How can God be put at risk? If God is all-knowing, all-powerful, can risks be real for God? I think they can. And if you look at the history of God’s dealings with us, you might be led to agree.

The Lord God, when humanity was created, not only gave creation the Breath of Life, but God also gave us freedom of choice. In that, we are created only a little lower than the angels, as the Psalmist reminds us. What a risk that was for God! Lucifer had already rebelled against the heavenly Kingdom, beginning a season of spiritual warfare that would last through millennia. Yet here was God, asking for it all over again - creating a being, a human being, that would be free to do as one pleased. God took that risk. God limited Himself and His power to allow us the freedom to grow and develop, to create and to mold. It would not be the last risk taken.

In the centuries to come, God would send a succession of prophets and messengers. More risks. There was the risk that a messenger, once chosen, would not obey God's commands. How many messengers might God have called who did not respond affirmatively? How many of us here have heard the call, felt the prompting of the Spirit, been encouraged to witness - and yet, in the end, did nothing?

People like that normally are not written about in scripture, though I am sure you have all heard about Jonah and the great fish. The reason why Jonah and the fish got mixed up with each other in the first place is because God told Jonah to head east to Nineveh to call the people of that mighty city to repentance. And what was Jonah's response? He booked the earliest passage he could find on a ship going west, as far from Nineveh as he could get. God took a risk on Jonah - and until the great fish came along, the outcome of that risk didn't look too good.

Even if prophets and messengers do obey, there are other risks - the risk that God might raise someone up, only to have the people turn a deaf ear. Moses did everything except stand on his head to get Pharaoh to listen, to let God's people go. And yet the Egyptians did not pay heed, until it was too late, and thousands were slain.

Elijah warned Queen Jezebel many times about her ways. There is nothing God would have wanted more than for a leader in Israel to see the light, to return to proven

ways - the ways of goodness and righteousness. Yet Jezebel did not hear; and not only did she suffer for it, but the entire nation of Israel did as well.

Amos warned Judah about the coming destruction. The people had already seen in the northern tribes carried away into captivity by the enemy. If Judah persisted in her ways, the same fate could befall her. And yet nothing happened to change Judah, and so she fell, and her people were carried off into exile.

Every time God speaks, God risks so much. God risks that we may not hear. God risks that we may hear, but then reject the message. God risks not only our welfare, but His own. The Lord God does not wish for our destruction, or woe, or pain - which we sometimes seem so eager to visit upon ourselves.

Why else would God have taken the greatest risk of all, the risk that we are about to celebrate in a few days' time, at Bethlehem? If we would just look at human history, any lesser god would have given up on us long, long ago. So many attempts to save humanity from itself have failed. So many deeds of love, of compassion, of heavenly outreach were rejected by the ones God loves the most. And yet it was at that time that God took the greatest risk of all.

Think of it! When the angel came to Mary, she could have said that she wanted no part of this arrangement - no part of giving birth to a child out of wedlock with no visible means of support. There's another little verse by Madeleine l'Engle which puts it this way:

This is the irrational season
when love blooms bright and wild.
Had Mary been filled with reason,
there'd have been no room for the Child.

Indeed, Mary could have thought it all out, and then said "No."

And there wasn't only Mary: the shepherds could have ignored the summons to the cradle. Joseph could have had Mary put away, and found someone new. Herod could have found the Child and had Him murdered. John could have refused to baptize Him.

Jesus Himself was free, I believe, to refuse the Father Himself. Did not Jesus pray in Gethsemane that the cup be taken from Him? Was not Jesus tempted, in the desert, to fall down and worship Satan in return for the kingdoms of this world? Was not Christ tempted to come down from the Cross to save Himself?

God's plan was at risk at every turn. So much of it hinged on human free will - and we see where free will had resisted God's plans before. And yet, God took the risk anyways, because God loves us so much.

In the same way, God is taking a risk with Oliver Reid Blackburn. For we all have the potential to become sons and daughters of God. What will come of little Oliver? Will he become Christlike, showing to others that God is love, that Jesus is our everything, and that the Spirit guides us for our good? Those are some of the risks that God is taking with this newest member of God's people. But in order that responsibility for such risks not fall completely on the shoulders of Oliver's parents and family, God has gathered us all here, together, as a people, as a church, called out from the world, to help Oliver in that cause.

May we, this congregation - we, as the members of Oliver's family in Christ - be worthy of that call, of that risk, which God has taken in this young life, that through him many, many people might be blessed, just as through the Christ-child of Bethlehem all the world would be blessed.

Let us pray: