

There is a yearning

Luke 1:39-56

December 22, 2013

So, what is on your mind this morning? I'll tell you what's on my mind ...

My office is on my mind. Last Tuesday morning, just after staff meeting, I heard a hissing sound from behind my desk. Suddenly, the wall heater erupted in a gush of steam and water. It flooded half my office before we could find the valve and shut off the flow of water. My office is still in disarray.

My Mom is on my mind. A week ago Saturday, I got a call from my Mom at 6:20 a.m. She said, "I fell and I hurt my hip." I was heartbroken. She had finally finished her rehab from hip replacement surgery and just moved back into her apartment and was doing so well, and now? I was afraid we'd be back at square one, starting the long process all over again. Fortunately, she did not damage the hip joint or leg. She did fracture her pelvis. She will still be able to walk on her own and to stay in her room, but will have to deal with some pain for a while.

Our neighborhood is on my mind. Tuesday afternoon, I participated in a bus tour of Waterloo neighborhoods organized by Anna May Weems. The new president of the University of Northern Iowa was there and the dean of the College of Education, as well as representatives from HyVee and Veridian Credit Union. The president of Allen College, the Black Hawk County sheriff, and councilman Quentin Hart were also in attendance. We drive through many east side neighborhoods, talking about possibilities for improvement and obstacles to development. We drove past our church, hearing the sheriff describe our Church Row neighborhood as the hot spot in Waterloo for crime and drug use. And I thought about us, sitting right in the middle of it. What are we doing for our neighborhood? What can we do?

These are some of my the things on my mind, some rather small and trivial, some more important, but they are what they are, and today they are part of me. You bring the concerns, the worries, the hopes and fears, the sorrows that are part of you today. What's on your mind and heart?

Maybe Phyllis Boatman is on your mind. She has spent this week in the hospital dealing with complications from pneumonia.

Maybe Liz Thorpe's and her family are on your mind. Last Sunday, she shared the news that her sister, Maureen, had died leaving nine children and a very large extended family.

Maybe the family of Claire Davis in on your mind. She was the seventeen-year-old girl randomly shot by a student who entered a Colorado high school looking to do harm to the school's debate team coach. She died yesterday afternoon.

Or you may have any number of other people and other things that you care about on your mind, weighing on your heart. We all come into the sanctuary this morning with many things on our minds and hearts, and it is good that we do, because those cares belong here. We do not leave our hearts at the door, but we come into this sanctuary as we are, eager to find here comfort and support and sympathy and help, from each other and from God.

But something else happens here as we gather on a Sunday morning, as we gather together this Sunday morning, something truly remarkable. Because we are more than the sum of our parts. We are more together than the aggregate of our separate concerns.

*There is a yearning
in hearts weighed down by ancient grief
and centuries of sorrow ...*

Wow! That is powerful poetry from Susan Boersma. We come not just with hearts weighed down with our own cares, but with hearts weighed down by ancient grief and centuries of sorrow. We sense here the larger community, the larger whole, of which we are a part, that includes us, but is so much bigger than us, too. We are aware of our shared burdens, of our solidarity and shared destiny with the people in the houses next door to us, with the people across the river from us, with the people of North Korea and Myanmar and Greece and South Sudan.

And bigger still, we are aware here of humanity's long and convoluted and seemingly futile struggle to achieve justice for all people, not just a few, to provide the conditions for a full and satisfying life for all people, not just a few, to enjoy together the shalom for which God created us. Here, in this sanctuary, on this Sunday morning, there is within our hearts a yearning, for tomorrow, for a new day.

Like the yearning in Mary's heart. Like the yearning in Elizabeth's heart. Like the yearning within the hearts of their people, the Jews. Because they had known centuries of sorrow!

Six hundred years before Mary came to Elizabeth's door, their land, their nation, the fair city of Jerusalem and its Temple in which Elizabeth's husband, Zechariah, now served were all devastated by the armies of the Babylonian empire, and none of it had been the same since. It was no more their land,

their nation, their city, their Temple. It all belonged over the centuries first to Babylon and then to Persian and then Greece and now Rome.

They had no freedom. They enjoyed no shalom. The spoils and the good life were reserved for those in power, and they, the Jews, the people of what once had been the nation of Israel, had to make do as they could, like aliens in their own homeland.

Their hearts were weighed down with centuries of sorrow and with ancient grief, the grief of unfulfilled promise, the grief of a failed call. God brought them out of Egypt, out of slavery. The Lord delivered them from oppression, to make them his own people, a people to serve him and bring him delight by being a light to the nations, by modeling the ways of justice and faithfulness and love for all to see. But they had failed miserably.

They and their leaders, with just a few brilliant exceptions, had shown themselves to be just like everybody else, motivated not by love, but by greed, like everybody else, thirsty not for peace, but for power and wealth, like everybody else, servants not of their God, but of their own whims and fancies, like everybody else.

And they suffered for it. Year after year, generation after generation, century after century, they suffered the terrible consequences of their own faithlessness, and of their victimization at the hands of their enemies. They yearned for a new king, for a messiah, for Emmanuel, for one who would bring the Spirit of God among them again, for one who would rule justly, who would judge the poor fairly, who would defend the rights of the helpless.

They were waiting for God to stretch out his mighty arm and scatter the proud with all their plans. Emmanuel! God is with us!

They were longing for the day when God would bring down mighty kings and lift up the lowly. Emmanuel! God is with us!

They were yearning for God to fill the hungry with good things, and to send away the rich with empty hands. Emmanuel! God is with us!

They were yearning for God to keep the promise made to their ancestors, to come to them and help them. Emmanuel! God is with us!

And Mary's yearning, Elizabeth's yearning, is our yearning, too. With them, with their people, we are yearning for tomorrow, for a new day, when this world is put right, when there will be no more grief or crying or pain.

There is a yearning. And that is the second truly remarkable thing that happens when we gather together. There is a yearning -- not despair, but a yearning. Our hearts are weighed down by ancient grief, but our hearts are not broken! Our hearts are weighed down by centuries of sorrow, but our desire has not been quenched! We are yearning for tomorrow, believing that it can be different, believing that when it comes, it will be different, not just more of the same.

We are yearning, not just idly wishing, but aching for that tomorrow to come. We are yearning for Emmanuel, not hoping to escape from this place or this time or this life, but yearning for God to be among us, for God to come to us, for God to come here ... now.

And the third truly remarkable thing that happens is this: God does! The tomorrow we long for, the joy we ache for, is already here.

Did you hear Mary's song?

*God has remembered me ...
God has stretched out his mighty arm ...
God has filled the hungry with good things ...
God has kept the promise ...*

And did you hear what Elizabeth reported to Mary?

As soon as I heard your greeting, the baby within me jumped with gladness!

But what has changed? They and all their people are still what they have always been. Rome, ruthless Rome, is still in charge. The rich are still rich, the poor still poor, and the hungry still hungry. So why is Mary singing songs of praise and Elizabeth's baby jumping for joy? What has changed?

Mary is pregnant! Mary is pregnant with a child. Mary is pregnant with the promise. Mary is pregnant with what God's word and God's Spirit have put in her.

Mary is pregnant with Emmanuel. God has come to her. God is carried in her. In her body God has come to us. There is already reason for joy, because tomorrow is already carried in her, today.

And tomorrow is already carried in us, today. My favorite line of this text comes at the end: "Mary stayed about three months with Elizabeth and then went back home."

Mary went home! Back to Nazareth. Back to her likely baffled fiancé. Back to the physical demands of nine months of pregnancy. Back to the emotional and spiritual demands of this pregnancy. Back to the struggles and sorrows of this life, and to the sorrow, as Simon will later say to her, that will break her own heart.

She goes home to all that her life still is and will be, but she goes home filled with joy, because God is with her, because God is with her people, because God is with us, because she carries within her own body ... Emmanuel.

Today, we will go home. We will go home to our own little houses in our own little towns, perhaps to families or perhaps alone, facing the demands and struggles and sorrows of our own lives as they are. But we will go home filled with joy, because God is with us, because Emmanuel is carried too in our bodies.

*O holy Child of Bethlehem, descend to us, we pray;
Cast out our sin and enter in; be born in us today!
We hear the Christmas angels the great glad tidings tell;
O come to us, abide with us, our Lord Emmanuel!*