

WGUMC December 16, 2018  
Luke 1:39-45

“Welcome Your Inner Child”

Let's be honest. Adults love Christmas because we love to indulge our inner child. If we don't have children in our lives to buy toys for, we buy them for ourselves. Case in point: now that Kristen has gone to college, my husband buys himself model trains. I admit it; I got him started last Christmas, and now I'm having second thoughts. I've always argued that his book-buying obsession took up too much room. Now we have a big train table and, of course, books about trains!

So, I'm thinking about the inner child as I read the scripture this morning. You could say that this story about Mary's visit with Elizabeth is really a story about the inner child, because each of these women has a child *in* her womb! Elizabeth is carrying a boy she will name John. He will grow up to be the first Baptist. Mary is carrying Jesus. He'll grow up feeding 5,000 at a potluck, which I guess makes him the first Methodist.

After hearing from the angel the shocking news that the Holy Spirit has made her pregnant, Mary needs to process it, so she heads for the hills to visit her older cousin, Elizabeth. And at the sound of Mary's voice, Elizabeth, too, is filled with the Holy Spirit. Elizabeth says to Mary, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me?" Think about it. That makes Elizabeth the first disciple, the first person in the gospels to call Jesus "Lord." But she is prompted to say this because the baby she is carrying leaps for joy at the sound of Mary's greeting.

Let's take a look at John and learn something about our own inner child. We all know that babies can hear even when they are in the womb. But this kid doesn't just hear Mary's voice. He senses Jesus' presence. Baby John somehow knows that Emmanuel—God-with-us—has come.

I don't know what you make of this story, but what I make of it is that this baby in the womb is showing us that he has an

instinctive connection to God, something that we all have. It is a fundamental reality in our lives. It is a connection that is stronger than blood and goes deeper than biology.

You've heard of the "God gene." Back in 2004, the geneticist Dean Hamer wrote a book called, *The God Gene: How Faith is Hardwired into Our Genes*. He argued that a gene called vesicular monoamine transporter 2 predisposes people to having spiritual or mystical experiences. While our religious inclinations may well have a genetic component, that's not what I'm talking about here. What I'm talking about is something science can't prove or disprove. It's captured in Psalm 139:

For it was you who formed my inward parts;  
you knit me together in my mother's womb.  
I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.  
Wonderful are your works; that I know very well.  
My frame was not hidden from you,  
when I was being made in secret,  
intricately woven in the depths of the earth.  
Your eyes beheld my unformed substance...  
How weighty are your thoughts, O God!  
How vast is the sum of them!  
I try to count them—they are more than the sand;  
I come to the end—I am still with you.

There is a name for this unformed substance. In religious circles, we call it “soul.” That is our connection. You could say our soul is secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth, if you want to be poetic about it. Science doesn’t know what to make of it. But we can experience it. And we can welcome it. That’s what I’m talking about when I talk about welcoming the inner child.

There’s just one problem. We have to get that soul from the womb and out into the world. And that process of going from a place of relative comfort and safety to a place of discomfort and insanity is a process that necessarily puts our soul at great peril. The world is not a welcoming place for any soul. There are factors in our society and conflicts in our families and illnesses in our bodies that seek to kill our soul every single day. And protecting our soul, let alone nurturing it so that it can grow, is a Herculean task that we cannot take on alone.

A baby being evicted from the womb and pushed out into the world is a bit like Adam and Eve getting kicked out of the Garden of

Eden: quite a rude awakening. East of Eden, Adam and Eve discover that they are naked, vulnerable, and alone. Both physical and spiritual dangers are lurking everywhere, but they can't see them because they are so busy trying to make a living. It's hard for your soul to survive when you have to struggle so hard to keep your body alive.

We try to shield babies from these harsh realities as long as possible. But the world has little patience for children, inner or otherwise. Eventually, babies have to grow up but, too often, their souls do not. And what many people never realize—unless they spend years in therapy—is that their inner child is still there, hiding away, far too scared to come out and play.

So how do we welcome that inner child? How do we make the child feel safe and loved? As Nicodemus pointed out in the Gospel of John, we certainly can't climb back into our mothers' wombs. [John 3] But we can reclaim our original connection to God if we are willing to revisit where we lost that connection. Welcoming your inner child

is not so much about buying it toys as it is about revisiting trauma, which is something most of us are loathe to do. But if we want to recover our soul connection to God, we're going to have to go back to where that connection was first severed. We're going to have to get in touch with the person we were before that important person in our lives went away, before that parent failed at being a parent, before that injury or illness took our joy away, before that pain, that addiction, took our freedom away or before that dream died and all but took our future away.

We have to go back and welcome that child and love that child. In her book, *Love Without Limits*, Jacqueline Bussie tells the story about her mother who suffered in an abusive marriage. She wondered why her mother didn't leave and then realized that "only someone who *believed* they deserved better could ever muster the courage to get out." [p. 140] Her mother had never been able to love her inner child enough to rescue it. In growing up with her

mother, Bussie learned some hard lessons about loving yourself and your inner child. Here are a few of them:

1. Self-love is a reflection of your face in the ocean of God's love for you.
2. Without self-love, you'll never survive this broken world. It's as necessary as oxygen for making a life sing.
3. When abusive people in this world try to hurt you, self-love serves as your only armor against them. Your self-love is God's resounding, infinite, irreversible YES to their human NO. [p. 144]

For some people, it can take a lifetime or longer to learn to love that child. But most of us who have gone back to revisit the trauma in our lives find that once we go back there and let God help us love that child, then the trauma begins to transform. We discover that we don't have to stay there. We don't have to be stuck there. With a lot of patience and grace, we can learn to love the wounds we got from the world. They could be very useful to us as we go forward, trying to love God and our neighbor. Haters may have put them there, but our divine Lover takes them and sanctifies them. Beauty marks on the soul you could call them.

Jesus in Mary's womb was God's resounding, infinite, irreversible YES to our human NO. And that was the YES that caused baby John to jump for joy. That same YES echoes in the soul of every one of us, but we have to have the ears to hear it and the heart to receive it. Just as babies are born without a grown-up's ability to see and to focus on physical things, we don't come into this world with an ability to focus on spiritual things. Our eyes and ears of faith are not fully functional, which is why we have to develop them.

Mary spent three months learning what she could learn from Elizabeth, her older, wiser cousin, before she went back to Joseph, who was her fiancé but not the father of her child. We may need a bit longer to process what we are going through, but it's worth the effort. And we'll know that we are making progress when something in us leaps for joy at the news that Jesus has come near to us.

Joy is the sure sign that Jesus is near and so I hope that you have a very joyous Christmas. But if you can't feel the joy this year, take it as a sign that it's time to make haste to the hill country so



you can look for your lost soul, welcome your inner child, and love the you that God is trying to bring to birth. *Joy to the world, the Lord is come! Let earth receive her king. Let every heart prepare him room and heaven and nature sing.*