

## **Fragile**

Luke 1: 26-55

*Fourth Sunday of Advent/ 24<sup>th</sup> December 2006*

Several weeks ago I received an email from Cammy Crane. Cammy, you'll recall, was an Lilly Intern with us two summers ago, shadowing your pastors to explore the vocation of pastoral ministry. After graduating from Davidson College, Cammy left for India as a volunteer in mission for the Presbyterian Church. She was placed in the South Indian state of Kerala at a place called Mandiram, known as destitute home. Mandiram was founded in the 1930s by two siblings who took the homeless into their home. When they realized that many of the people they were helping needed serious medical attention, they started a hospital. Soon, an orphanage for girls was added as well. Today, Mandiram has close to two hundred residents. Some are homeless, others have been abandoned by their families, some families who are willing but unable to care for them, others pay rent to live in their apartments, and some are employees – and then there's Cammy.

Cammy's job is to become part of the Mandiram community. *But how do you become part of a community of people if you can't speak their language, how can honest, meaningful relationships develop without language, and a language, Cammy relates, she didn't know even existed until a few months ago. As you can imagine, it's been frustrating at times. Conversations haven't ventured beyond the "how-are-you" variety, followed by long awkward silences and staring. With at least two ways to pronounce the letter "n" there was no way she was going to learn Malayalam (malayALam). She asked herself, "If I cannot speak Malayalam, how will I ever become folded into the Mandiram community? How will people know what I'm like? How will I know what they are like? How on earth is this community thing supposed to happen?"*

Then one day she fell. Running with children to collect the laundry in the rain, she fell, ripping the knees of her pants on the concrete. She laughed, the girls laughed, as she walked back to her room – soaking wet, hair a mess, with a big hole in her pants. Most of the residents saw her go by. Her fall was the juiciest bit of gossip for days. Men and women went up to her and asked, "What happened?" as they tried to disguise their laughter. And she laughed with them, remembering the fun she had in the rain. "Vinu!" she would respond. "I fell."

Now, everywhere she goes she's greeted with "Hello!" When she enters the church on Sunday, women immediately wave her into their pews to sit next to them.

The young girls climb all over her without care, and the older women tease her as they tease their friends. Just recently, a woman grabbed her wrist and pulled her into a room where they make paper-bags; Cammy helped her punch holes for the bag handles. She sat there with several women with the hole puncher until her hands were red and as she sat she realized that she had somehow become part of that community. And the act that made her a part of the community, she writes, “Was not any great conversation that I had with someone, but was the moment when I fell. When others saw my weaknesses,” Cammy says, “I was no longer seen as being beyond the residents, assume American woman who is gracing Mandiram with her presence. I am Cammy – the girl who can punch holes in paper bags and help with homework; ...I am Cammy, *who will willingly admit to falling.*”<sup>1</sup>

“Vinu.” I fell. In ironic, paradoxical, and surprising ways insight breaks through our pretensions and life is transformed. It is counter-intuitive, but true that we communicate more of ourselves not by being strong and powerful, invincible, set apart, or high and lifted up, but through our weaknesses, in those moments of vulnerability and powerlessness, when we fall and are placed at the mercy of others to care for us and love us – *or not*, but that’s the risk, that’s the risk.

That’s the risk. That’s the risk God took, isn’t it? Cammy’s earlier questions echoes God’s own questions to Himself witnessed by scripture, “*How will people know what I’m like? How will I know what they are like? How on earth is this community thing supposed to happen?*” Scripture is one long witness of God’s desire to communicate Himself and to know who we are and to form a beloved community on earth where God and humanity dwell together. The Hebrew Scriptures attest to the great conversation between Yahweh and Israel through the prophets. The Christian witness affirms and celebrates this, for that conversation prepared the way for the first Christians when they realized a new disclosure or a fuller self-communication of God, not through words, the “Word made flesh,” God’s divine speech embodied that “lived among us (John 1: 14),” as John put it in his Gospel or as early Christians sang in a hymn quoted by Paul to the Philippians, “though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross (Philippians 2: 6-8). This is God “falling” as it were into human hands – into our hands – and that’s a tremendously great risk.

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<sup>1</sup> Cammy recounted her story in a recent email to friends at the end of December. Italic emphasis added. See Cammy’s blog for a full account of her time at Mandiram: <http://cammy1.blogspot.com/>

It's remarkable that God communicates who he is through the powerlessness of a baby. Some people admire Jesus Christ because it is said the way he lived his life was *Godlike*. But the earth-shattering news of the Christian experience and transformed lives and overturned empires was the other way around: *God is Christ-like*. Who is the God of the universe? The God who risks entering human life, not coming down out of the heavens as a grown adult to save us, but One who enters in the form of a powerless and vulnerable baby. This is who I am, says Yahweh. This Jesus, this *Yeshua*, whose name *means who he is* and whose name *means what he does*: "Yahweh Saves." It's remarkable what this story says to us about the kind of God who loves us. That God entrusts God's son to Mary and to Joseph to *care* for him and *protect* him and *cherish* him and *love* him – and for Mary, to actually *carry* him. We might even consider such a thought *hysterical*.

Now, to say something is hysterical, we might say it were funny. But it's also associated with the word "hysteria," which refers to an emotional outburst, usually from fear. This is what we need to remember as we hear Gabriel's message to Mary. The root of "hysterical" is *hystera*, the Greek word for womb. Think of hysterectomy. What's the connection and why is this significant? Let me try to explain. We have to turn to Plato (427-347 B. C.) and Aristotle (384-322 B. C.). Although both were incredibly wise, they were, sadly, also highly chauvinistic, as were many in their age. Plato believed that emotional responses to the world were faulty reactions. The goal of a civilized society was to rout out emotion, strive for pure reason, and that this could only be accomplished by men, and impossible for women, who are primarily emotional creatures. Plato and others believed that a woman's womb was the seat of her irrationality.<sup>2</sup> They claimed that at times a woman's womb would actually uproot itself and travel around inside her body. When that happened, it led to emotional problems, hence the diagnosis "hysteria." Remarkably, this was a prevailing medical diagnosis, even a psychoanalytic diagnosis for women (not men) up to the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>3</sup>

Now, if this attitude toward the womb was prevalent in the Greek and Roman world, I can't help but think that Luke, educated physician that he was, would have been familiar with it. Whether he was or not, we don't know. Nevertheless, to suggest and stress, as Luke does here, that the womb would be the place God is "smuggled into

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<sup>2</sup> See Plato's *Republic* written in 360 B. C. I am grateful to the Rev. Dr. Scott Black Johnston, minister of Trinity Presbyterian Church, Atlanta, GA, for his sermon "Head of Household?" from December 17, 2006, for these insights.

<sup>3</sup> See Sebastian Faulks recent novel, *Human Traces* (London: Hutchinson Press, 2005), which recounts the early years of modern psychiatry in England and on the continent of Europe.

the world,”<sup>4</sup> in that apparent place of irrationality and emotionality in Luke’s world, in that surprising place, not to be expected place tells us something about this God. Luke seems to offer an alternative vision. It’s really quite astounding that Luke wants us to see that the good news begins in the womb; an image that is perhaps all the more striking for us because we know just how fragile a place it is, the space that has the potential to nurture and bring forth life, but not without risk and loss. The good news of Christmas affirms that God comes to us in *fragile places*. The *Magnificat*, Mary’s responsive song of praise, is a hymn of gratitude that the God of salvation comes to the lowly, the powerless, to those who hunger. God’s speaks to us through the language of vulnerability and fragility.

As I was beginning to write this sermon yesterday morning at home, the doorbell rang. It was the mailman delivering an express mail package, part of my Christmas gifts from my brother, Craig. In proper Advent mode, I had been expectantly waiting for the delivery because I knew I had to sign for it. As I was placing the box under my Christmas tree, I noticed that it had the word FRAGILE stamped in red all over it and I smiled, because I had just renamed the sermon title and typed out on my computer just one word: *Fragile*.

FRAGILE. FRAGILE. FRAGILE. It’s all so fragile, this life, isn’t it? The environment is fragile. Relationships are fragile. Peace is fragile. People are fragile – vulnerably delicate, easily broken. Even those who appear to be very strong, maybe especially the strong, are really very brittle. Yet, Luke tells us it is precisely there in these places, and especially in people – in a vulnerable baby – where salvation risks being born.

“God’s ultimate purpose is birth,” the German mystic, Meister Eckhart (c.1260-1327/8) said, “He is not content until he brings his Son to birth in us.” Christmas joy comes from knowing that God continues to be born again and again *in us*. And that womb where God births the Son is within us – whether male or female. The womb is that fragile place, that weak place, that vulnerable place that requires extra care and attention. The most fragile place I know is the human heart. Yet, through the caring, protecting, cherishing, and loving those fragile places within us and within others, through the caring and protecting, cherishing and loving that which we carry within us, these spaces, with loving nurture and care, can become the very places where God’s Son

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<sup>4</sup> Phrase from Barbara Brown Taylor, “Mothers of God,” *Gospel Medicine* (Cowley, 1995), p. 150. Grateful to Rev. Christy Waltersdorff, minister of York Center Church of the Brethren, Lombard, IL, for this reference.

is birthed in us. That's enough to cause our souls, our hearts to magnify the Lord, to rejoice and to be glad.

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