

For the first week of our Advent Prayer Walk, one of the stations was for writing an honest Christmas letter to God. Not one about how many soccer championships or how many Ivy League scholarships the kids or grandkids won, how many trips to Disneyland, how many vacations in Europe you took, but a real one about what did or didn't happen in your life, what is or isn't going on in your soul, all the things you would never tell anyone on your Christmas card list but can't keep from God.

If we were really honest, maybe our letter would sound something like this:

[First letter] "Dear God, I don't feel like Christmas this year. I don't have time to find the stillness. I don't feel the glow. I'm not in touch with the reason for the season. And I just can't bring myself to believe that Jesus is coming into my life this year any more than last year. I have no idea what the old prophet means by "preparing the way." Every time I try to

focus on my faith, life keeps getting in the way.

I'll probably just get through Christmas again this year and try to make a fresh start in the new year. So if you're going to do anything miraculous around here, you're just going to have to do it without me or in spite of me. You'll have to send the Angel Gabriel if you want to break through to me. What about that new life you want me to receive? I guess you're going to have to impregnate me. Yours unexpectedly, That's me."

Well, we're in luck. The Bible is a book full of stories about pregnancy. In the biblical world, there is death everywhere, and God is always having to overcome insurmountable obstacles in order to bring new life somewhere. It is the same in our world. We are in no less need of some new life right here.

So, I figure that if we want to be a part of the Bible project, if we want to do our part in bringing new life into the world, we could do a lot worse than to listen to the pregnant women of the Bible. I wonder what their honest letters to God

would have to say?

[Second letter] "Dear God, Forgive me for laughing when the angel told me that I was going to have a child. At 90? Really, Lord? And Abraham, he was 100! Now, I don't know anything about biology, but I know old ladies don't have babies.

"I didn't believe then what I know now, that it is never too late to bring new life into the world. We are never too old to do something brand new. Whether it's a new baby or a new challenge, you're always giving us something completely crazy to do. Not everyone has a womb, but everyone can be like me, a mother of Israel in his own way. And we can all laugh at the amazing ways that you use a bunch of dried up, shriveled up, used up believers to give birth to just what the world needs right now. I'm still chuckling. Your servant, Sarah."

[Third letter] "Dear God, I didn't laugh for much of my married life. But my husband's other wife sure laughed at me, because she had children and I couldn't have any. If I lived in a

different century, I'd cast my vote for monogamy. Oddly, I wasn't comforted when my husband said to me, 'Why Hannah, am I not more to you than ten sons?' Please!

"I used to cry so desperately. Remember how I used to pray that I would get pregnant? But what I really wanted was a purpose. I wanted my life to mean something. I wanted to contribute something. I felt like I had nothing. Worse than that, that I was a nothing. Remember that day when I was praying in the temple, and it dawned on me that I was only ever going to have what I was willing to give away. I couldn't bring a new life into the world if all I wanted to do with it was to validate my own life. I could only have a son if I would have him not just for me, but for everyone.

"Then and there, I promised you that I would give him to you. And I did. My son served your old Priest Eli, anointed the first King Saul, and named the young man, David, King of all Israel.

"So, go tell all the barren people whose spirits are without life, whose hearts are without hope in this world. Tell them to take it from me, the mother of Samuel: there is new life in them, but it belongs to you. If they would only nurture that life and dedicate it to your purpose, they would never be without your promise. There is no telling what you would do for them.' Bless them. Your handmaid, Hannah"

[Fourth letter] "Dear God, you really know how to leave them speechless. I've never known my priest husband to be at a loss for words, but when you told him that I would conceive and bear him a son, he was struck dumb. For nine months, he couldn't make a sound. All he could do was watch me and wonder at the life that you were growing in me.

"Pregnancy was the most peaceful time of my life. In that blissful quiet, I could feel all my disappointments drain away. Because what I had thought was impossible, you made possible. What I had thought was my disgrace, you filled with grace.

The funny thing is my husband felt it, too. Even though I was the one having the baby, he was the one who was glowing. So, my husband now likes to say that you don't have to have a womb to bear new life. All you have to do is shut your mouth and open your heart. Whether you're a man or a woman, that's a good place to start. Yours forever and always, Elizabeth"

I know from my own experience that Elizabeth is right. You don't have to be pregnant to be glowing with new life. I was 28 years old and oh so single. It was six weeks after brain surgery, and I was already back to work as an associate pastor in Eugene. With the seizures stopped, somehow I had more energy than I'd ever had before. And I had more feeling than I'd ever felt before. I was laughing like Sarah. I was crying like Hannah. When the fog of the headache finally lifted, I could see more beauty and more blessing than I'd ever seen before.

And my parishioners were noticing. They would come up and say to me, "You're glowing. Are you pregnant?" Now that

would have been another virgin birth! But in a way, I was with child. I was giving birth to my new self. I was heavy with anticipation for the new life that was just beginning for me. I was pregnant with the possibilities. And, like Mary, it scared the bejesus out of me.

In many ways, it was a long recovery. I had to learn and unlearn a lot of things in order to live the new life God gave me. Almost twenty years later, I'm still learning. And so there's one more letter I need to read from someone who was even less prepared and more surprised than I by the new life God was bringing into the world.

[Fifth Letter] "Dear God, though I am no longer a wide-eyed little girl, I still have trouble getting my mind around what happened that day. Fortunately for me, I had no idea what Gabriel was saying to me. I had no clue what I was getting into. I didn't know who my baby would be. I couldn't believe that he would be all that you said he would be. But no one had taught

me to ask questions. No one had given me permission to come to my own conclusions. I was as trusting as a child because I was a child.

"I was young enough and scared enough to do whatever you wanted me to do. I could say, but I couldn't yet understand the words: 'Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.' To be honest, it took a whole lifetime for me to live into those words. I'd say that for anyone who wants to bear new life into the world, you have to realize that it's going to take your life. My son Jesus left me, and over the years, I cried a lake of tears. Then my tears went dry and my spirit became a desert. But after what happened at Calvary, after I saw that the tomb was empty, you baptized me in your river of mercy, and life became an ocean of love for me.

"So, if anyone remembers me, I hope they remember my words and not the wasteland. Because I finally know what I was saying all those years ago. I pray they'll receive the new life

you want to give them, even if they're scared about what it will cost them. I want them to look at me and then rejoice in whatever new life is stirring in them, whatever dream is trying to be born in them. I want to tell them: 'Don't doubt it, just do it. Give your life for that life. You'll never regret it.' I didn't. After all those years, I could see how you let me be what I was born to be, according to your word. Love, Mary."