

“Infant Faith” Luke 1:39-45 November 11, 2012
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Good Shepherd PC, Minneapolis
On the evening of Evangeline Moon’s Baptism
Also at Faith Presbyterian Church, Tacoma
February 6, 2022 (when Covid hit Steven Nicoletti)

I heard only last night that I was to preach this evening and so went looking for a sermon that I had not preached here at Faith. I found one that I preached in Minneapolis in November of 2012, on the Sunday on which my granddaughter, Evangeline Moon, was baptized. That sermon I preached under orders from my daughter. She gave me my subject. I have lived most of my life being bossed around by the women in my life, so there is nothing unusual about that! This sermon relates in a general way to the baptism of my granddaughter, but as often as I have preached about baptism and infant baptism, I don’t believe I had ever preached on the subject of infant faith, on our covenant children as *believers* even when they are babes in arms and still incapable of instruction in the gospel, of making a choice to believe, or of confessing their faith. It is that infant faith that is my subject this evening. In Minneapolis they live in Lutheran country. Actually, so do we here in Tacoma. Lutheran theology has a strong doctrine of infant faith. The great John Gerhard, perhaps the most influential of Lutheran theologians after Luther himself, wrote: “We are not solicitous about the mode of this faith, but we simply acquiesce in the fact that infants really believe.” [Cited in Schmid, *Doctr. Theol. of the Evan. Luth. Ch.*, 549] I mention that simply to assure you that the idea of believing infants is not unique to the Reformed Church. The Lutherans, however, are more likely to derive their doctrine of infant faith from the logic of salvation (if justification is by faith and necessary for salvation, then infants, especially those who die in infancy, must have faith); the Reformed from the plain-speaking of the Bible.

The text that I have read is well-known to us all. We read it, if at no other time, every year during Advent as it is part of the narrative of the Savior’s birth. But usually, when we read this text, our attention is devoted to Mary’s story, to the beautiful scene that Luke paints of the meeting of these two women, one much older, one very young, one a wife of many years the other but a maid, but both suddenly and unexpectedly drawn up into the great drama of the redemption of the world. We scarcely notice that this text is of immense importance to a doctrine that is closely related to our practice of infant baptism.

But, in a way, the most remarkable feature of this narrative is what Elizabeth describes as the reaction of her baby son, still in her womb, the baby who would become John the Baptist, to the presence of the incarnate Son of God. “

“...the baby in my womb leaped for joy.”

The “for” with which v. 44 begins suggests that it was the reaction of her baby that convinced Elizabeth that Mary was indeed carrying the one she calls here “my Lord.” It is sometimes argued that the baby himself, the fetus indeed, was not a conscious participant. It was Elizabeth, by the Holy Spirit, who interpreted his movement inside her as the indication of something. But that is not what the text *says*. What we are told is that the *baby leaped for joy!* It was not Elizabeth’s joy, but the baby’s that provoked the reaction. The action was the child’s, not the

mother's, and the motive was the child's, not the mother's. That is what Elizabeth, filled with the Holy Spirit, said had happened. That is, we know what she said was true because she spoke under the influence of the Holy Spirit. She might not have known it otherwise, but by the Holy Spirit she knew that her baby had leaped for joy at the presence of another baby in another woman's womb.

Now, I don't presume to know or to be able to tell you precisely what happened here: to explain *how* this was the act of an unborn child or what that act involved for the baby himself. As Frederic Godet, the French commentator wisely put it, the reference to the baby's leaping for joy refers to "the unfathomable depths of instinctive life." [*Commentary on St. Luke*, 61] Calvin speaks similarly.

"There is no point in becoming involved in subtle questions, whether the infant sensed the presence of Christ, or whether this were a feeling of devotion: let this suffice, that the infant leapt with a hidden impulse of the Spirit." [*A Harmony of the Gospels*, vol. 1, 32]

But to say even this much is profoundly important. We are not talking about a blob of tissue to which, somehow, the Spirit of God administered an electric jolt. This is not the twitching of a freshly caught and just cleaned trout that seems to "jump" when dropped in the frying pan. This is a *person* leaping *for joy*! While in what measure of conscious life this happened, we cannot say, we also cannot stop short of what Holy Scripture says happened.

And our Reformed authorities have not wanted to stop short. They have often referred to this text in reference to what is called *infant faith*. Now by that term they didn't mean that the baby John, in his mother's womb, understood the truth of sin and salvation as he would eventually learn it at his mother's knee. They hardly thought that John had adult-like powers of rationality and will while he was still in his mother's womb. They didn't suppose that at the moment he was born he could describe his experiences in the womb or recollect the joy he felt when the Lord Jesus drew near in the womb of *his* mother. They knew very well what babies are like, how unformed are their powers, and how long it takes for them to acquire the knowledge, the rationality, and the exercise of the will that we associate with living faith.

When they spoke of *infant faith* they didn't mean that infants *believed* in the same way that adults believe or even older children believe. They realized that the powers of intellect and will that active believing requires were beyond an infant. But they could not ignore what was said here about a baby leaping for joy. *After all, if all human beings are "conceived in sin" as the Bible says they are, if they are already sinners in the womb, moral agents, why can they not be believers in the womb as well. They are not, in the womb adult-like sinners, but then, why may they not be, in the same way, no adult-like believers?*

When others argued that this was such an extraordinary case -- after all, we're talking about John the Baptist and Jesus -- that nothing should be made of it, they replied in four ways.

1. *First*, they pointed out that while there were indeed extraordinary features to this history, it is not at all clear that an infant's capacity for spiritual life is unique to this history. John was conceived in sin like any other human being. We learn later in Luke that he grew up

like any other child. His wasn't some miraculous life unlike the life of other baby boys. He was filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb, as we read in 1:15, but then, there is a sense in which that may be true in some measure of vast multitudes of covenant children.

Nor, for that matter, is it unusual for babies in the womb to experience conscious life on some level. You mothers know all about this. Your babies dreamed in the womb, they stretched, sometimes, or so it seemed to you, they practiced boxing and pole vaulting. Because no one can return to the womb and discover what conscious life was like at that stage, much of this must remain a mystery to us. We are accustomed to this fact whether or not we reflect on it. So much happens in a child's conscious life until he or she is four or five of which there will remain no memory at all. And yet we would never deny that there was a measure of rationality and of the exercise of the will in those earliest years of life, nor would we deny that all of that thinking and choosing, all of that mental life, however lost to us now, was immensely formative for that child's life as he or she grew older.

2. *Second*, they pointed out that this is not the only place in the Bible where spiritual life is attributed to infants or to very little children. In Psalm 22:9 David says to the Lord, "...you are he who took me from the womb; you made me trust you at my mother's breasts. On you I was cast from my birth and from my mother's womb you have been my God." It is a small difference between the womb and the breast when we are considering the intellect and the power of the will.

In Psalm 71:5-6 we read a similar confession by another man. "For you, O Lord, are my hope, my trust, O Lord, from my youth. Upon you *I have leaned from before my birth*; you are he who took me from my mother's womb." These are striking statements and demand some explanation, all the more because there is nothing in the psalms themselves to suggest that these men thought their spiritual experience unusual or unique.

3. *Third*, in fact that experience is *not* unique. The fact of the matter is that perhaps the largest part of the believing church has a confession like that of those two psalm writers. They don't remember a moment when they stepped out of darkness into light. So far as they can recall they have been Christians all their lives, have believed in Jesus all their lives. But, if that is so, when did they become believers? When was the first exercise of their faith? When Polycarp told the judge at his trial that he had been a servant of Christ for 86 years he was telling the man *how old he was!* In the same way I have been a Christian for 71 years. But if that is so, as it is so for vast multitudes of Christians, then faith must have come very early and must have existed in the heart in some very simple, very basic form, before I and these many other Christians knew what it was.

Over the years, when people have joined the congregation I pastor, I have asked them when they became Christians. Frequently these are people who have been raised in a Christian home. And they will often tell me that when they were seven or eight their mother asked them if they had ever asked Jesus into their heart and so they knelt down by their bed and prayed. Or at summer camp a counselor challenged them all to ask the Lord

into their hearts and in answer to that challenge they did so. And I then ask them: “So are you saying that before you knelt by your bed or before you went to camp you were an enemy of God, you did not believe that Jesus died for you sins on the cross, and you refused to submit your life to him, but after getting up from beside your bed or after coming home from camp you gladly submitted your life to the Lord and rejoiced in the forgiveness of your sins?” And they will virtually always say, “Well, no, I don’t mean *that*.” What they mean is that they were taught in their spiritual culture that you were supposed to have an *experience* of conversion, and so they had one. But the fact is that their lives didn’t change at that point; their beliefs didn’t even change. They were believers before that time; they simply didn’t know how to understand or explain that fact. The number of Christians with *that* story is immense!

4. *Fourth*, our theologians pointed out the obvious fact that in the Bible covenant children are always included *among* the members of the church and the responsibility of parents and the church is to nurture them in a faith and a life that is assumed to be already theirs. The paradigm of child-rearing in a Christian home, according to the Bible, is always discipleship, never evangelism. The children of the church, in the Bible, are insiders, not outsiders. In fact, as you may have noticed in your reading of the Bible, there are almost no “converts” among the children of the faithful. The only outstanding examples -- that is, of people who were raised in what we know to be devout and faithful homes and who were raised by parents we know to have been conscientious in their parenthood -- but who became Christians only later, as adults, are the brothers and sisters of the Lord. And in their case, we are surely right to wonder if their coming to faith in adulthood rather than childhood had more to do with the role they would play as important witnesses of the Lord’s resurrection rather than as examples of what would regularly be the case. It was the resurrection of their brother, their seeing him alive after he had died, and they, of all people, being able to say that it *was* their brother, the self-same Jesus of Nazareth, that may explain why they did not believe in him from their saintly mother’s breast.

But, if it is so, as it certainly is, that the expectation in the Bible is that covenant children are insiders, not outsiders, then when did they become insiders? If salvation is by faith and they are saved, when did they begin to believe? We know, of course, that is not invariably the case -- all children of the covenant are not saved, alas -- but it is supposed to be the case, in the experience of pious, devout homes it is usually the case, and the Bible is written accordingly. But if this is so, it can be so only if faith is granted to our children very early in their lives.

Taking all that the Bible says together, mysterious as this may be in some respects, our fathers concluded that since faith is a fundamental disposition of the soul as well as a specific action, infant faith is first what theologians call a *habitus*, by which is meant a capacity or a spiritual disposition, we can speak of even babies in the womb as possessing *that*. Our theological tradition uses a rich terminology to speak of this capacity of faith from which actual acts of faith eventually spring. They spoke of faith as a seed; they spoke of the root of faith in an infant’s heart; of an inclination to faith; of faith as a principle already present perhaps even in the womb. [Bavinck, *Saved by Grace*, xxxii; citing *Ref. Dogm.* IV, 525] Calvin spoke of “a tiny spark” of

the Lord's presence in an infant's heart which heart "[God] will illumine in the future with the full splendor of his light..." [Inst. IV, xvi, 19-20]

When we think about this the more obvious it becomes. The fact is even with adult converts it is not always easy to tell when the great change came. Sometimes conversion is like dawn in northern latitudes. It is impossible to say precisely when night has ended and day has begun. Sometimes it is only upon reflection that a man or woman realizes that he has become, she has turned into a Christian believer. Such, if you remember, was the experience of C.S. Lewis, recounted so beautifully in his spiritual autobiography *Surprised by Joy*. So much happens below the surface of conscious reflection. Our natures are changed root and branch. Only sometimes does that new nature immediately and unmistakably reveal itself in decisive action, spiritual ecstasy, or flooding waves of peace as in such immortal conversions as those of Augustine or Pascal, John Bunyan or Charles Wesley, Charles Spurgeon, or Chuck Colson.

But, if so, how much more with little children, who have the root or the seed of faith which only slowly grows to bear fruit that we can see. When we stop to ponder this, as we should, we realize that our own salvation, however it came to us, whether as very little children or as adults, is a supreme mystery of divine grace and power. What precisely *is* the new birth? *How* does the Holy Spirit bring it to pass within us? How do we become and in what respects do we become *new creations* in Christ? What actually changes? Our appearance is the same, our personality remains largely the same, our powers of intellect and will, our dispositions, our talents remain much the same, and yet we are new people, new from the bottom up and from the inside out. The change occurs down deep, below our conscious awareness. We use familiar words to describe this divine work of creation, but we hardly know what we are talking about. The effect is profound and eternal, but we can only describe it by analogy and only to a certain point. This is the mystery of life.

Why then should it surprise us that such a profound change could be wrought in the youngest child, even in the heart of a baby in the womb? Calvin said that the baby in Elizabeth's womb leapt "with a hidden impulse of the Spirit." Well, to be sure. But how many times has that been the case with us? How many times have we felt things, thought things, recoiled from things, been drawn to things; how many times have we loved, or rejoiced, or wept because of "a hidden impulse of the Spirit"?

"There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy."

It is only the Christian who has forgotten what an utter mystery his own salvation is who can quibble at the Bible's assertion that babies in the womb are spiritual beings who can have faith, even if it is faith only in the seed or the root. Our life is a divine creation; our new life in Christ is likewise. And the mighty God can work where, when, and how he will. And it is entirely typical of his gracious work to create first the capacity, the disposition for what he will over time bring more and more to expression. The adult convert is, after all, only the bare beginning of the Christian life that will someday come from those first acts of faith, and, in the same way, the covenant child in the womb or at the breast is the bare beginning of that eternal, glorious life of true manhood or womanhood that will grow from those small beginnings. In you and in me, in

the case of every Christian, something deep inside us happened before we had any idea that it had. So it is with the children of the Lord when they are very small. In this way the faith of infants is a window on the entire nature and experience of salvation. First faith is in the seed, then in the stalk, then the corn, then the full corn in the ear. But it must first be in the seed before it can ever be in the full flower or fruit.

Husbands, I don't know about you, but my wife often in the morning shares her dreams with me. And her dreams are often simply ludicrous. People from various chapters of her life are mixed together in the dream, she is in one place, but then suddenly she is in another, people say and do the strangest things, and she is afraid or happy or sad over the oddest things that are going on in her dream. It is often so ridiculous that I wonder why she isn't awakened by the stupidity of it all. I have some dreams like that myself, but not as often as she does.

Now answer me a question, if you can. When we are dreaming like that, when our thoughts are flitting about creating an experience that flies in the face of all reason, when our reason seems to be asleep but our emotion wide awake, who and what are we at that moment? Are we believers in Christ then? Are we Christians then? Are we new creatures in Christ then? We would all surely say, would we not, that of course we are Christians, even when we are asleep, even when we seem to have no control over our rational faculties. Once we become Christians, we are always Christians even if in our dreams we seem to be living a life utterly detached from everything we know to be true.

Here, surely, is some comfort for Christian parents worried about a son or daughters spiritually adrift. In so many cases, it is as if the son or daughter fell asleep spiritually and began to dream a silly dream. But so often he or she *will* wake up and his or her new nature will assert itself once again.

Well, is this not in a way like the situation of a tiny baby, even a baby still in the womb. The Lord knows that child; he or she is already his. He may already have done the great work to change his or her sinful nature into that nature fit for the life of God. With that nature comes faith, for faith -- trust in God, the knowledge of God, and communion with God -- is the breath of that new nature, it is that nature expressing itself as it will and must. If it is only faith in the seed or the root, what is that to us? The baby has *everything*, if only in the seed or the root at that point in his or her life: intellect, emotion, motive, and will. The new man or woman is all there *in the seed*. And the seed will bear its fruit in time. Because faith is present in the seed, because the dispositions and capacities of the Christian have already been implanted, the child will grow up according to *that* new and holy nature, believing in Jesus all the way through infancy, childhood, adolescence, and adulthood, no matter the ups and downs, the twists and turns that the Bible teaches us will be the experience of every Christian.

This fact of infant faith is a grand demonstration of the nature of our salvation as the gift and the work of God, mysterious as it must be. It is a beautiful reminder of the duties of parents, to cherish and nurture the spiritual life that is already present in our children. And it is a fabulous privilege for the child -- something for he or she to be taught and to remember throughout life -- that the Lord met him, the Lord embraced her at the very headwaters of life, that he or she has always been the Lord's. It is not the testimony of every Christian to be sure. Conversion in

adulthood is a beautiful thing, a breathtaking wonder of divine grace and power. But there is something equally beautiful and, perhaps, more charming in a tiny infant already a child of God, already a believer in Jesus Christ, already the object of the Lord's tender care, whose little heart is already the temple of the Holy Spirit.

For most of world history and still today in many parts of the world, large numbers of infants die in their infancy. Our infant mortality rate in the United States may be the lowest in the world, but elsewhere it is much higher. Christians have always instinctively known that if their children were to die while very young, they did not, for that reason, lose the hope of their salvation. On the contrary, they believed, as surely they should, that God could be and was their savior too.

Precisely. And if an infant can die in the salvation of Jesus Christ, he or she can certainly live in that same salvation. It is a magnificent truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ and one both we and our children should ponder in amazement and undying gratitude.