

Christmas Eve, 2017

St. Paul's Anglican Church, Beaconsfield

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A few days ago we celebrated our 2<sup>nd</sup> daughter's 21<sup>st</sup> birthday. Twenty one years ago Hannah was born into the dark quietness of Undercliffe Hospital in Greenmount. A dark quietness which echoed the silent night of Bethlehem. It was quiet because we were the ONLY family in the hospital and it was dark because all the lights in the ward corridors were off, perhaps out of sympathy for a sleeping baby and perhaps to save on power bills. And so while Rani caught some sleep, I walked our newborn daughter up and down the ward quietly singing;

*Christians, awake! Salute the happy morn  
whereon the Savior of the world was born;  
rise to adore the mystery of love,  
which hosts of angels chanted from above;  
with them the joyful tidings first begun,  
of God incarnate and the virgin's Son.*

The poet David Whyte, writes of carrying his infant sleeping daughter with the moonlight coming in through the window. By moonlight he observes his daughter's little hand opening and closing and the tiny lines on her hands, metaphors for the unknown life which will unfold for her.. So the poet evokes a prayer for his daughter, trusting that the prayer is said with such integrity that it will carry her through the ups and downs of life which she will encounter and which are beyond his capacity to control. So here is the first part of the poem... "my sleeping daughter".

*Carrying a child,  
I carry a bundle of sleeping  
future appearances.  
I carry my daughter adrift on my shoulder,  
dreaming her slender dreams  
and I carry her beneath the window,  
watching her moon lit palm open and close  
like a tiny folded map,  
each line a path that leads where I can't go,  
so that I read her palm not knowing what I read*

*And walk with her in moon light on the landing,  
not knowing with whom I walk,  
making invisible prayers  
to go on with her where I can't go,  
conversing with so many unknowns  
that must know her more intimately than I do.*

*And so to these unspoken shadows and this broad night  
I make a quiet request to the great parental darkness  
to hold her when I cannot,  
to comfort her when I am gone,  
to help her learn to love the unknown for itself,  
to take it gladly like a lantern for the way before her,  
to help her see where ordinary light will not help her,  
where happiness has fled, where faith cannot reach.  
My prayer tonight for the great and hidden symmetries of life  
to reward this faith I have  
and twin her passages...  
of loneliness....with friendship,  
her exiles....with home coming,  
her first awkward steps.... With promised onward leaps.*

As I listen to this poem I imagine Mary and Joseph praying for their newborn son...praying that he might be safe, but knowing that he will be drawn into a future uncradled by them and full of painful and glorious promise, a journey involving:

- the loneliness of temptations in the desert and the friendship of his disciples who he will call friends;
- the exile of crucifixion and the homecoming of resurrection
- the awkward steps of an infant and the confident leaps of an adult, across the landscape of Palestine

In the humanity of Jesus, God transforms the world not through a set of infallible texts, or a book called '10 tips for a successful life'; or even a declaration of human rights. God transforms the world through the incarnation of the true image of God's self. All God seems to be saying is, 'look at me....gaze at me.....follow....me.....into the uniqueness of

yourself....a Christ-patterned WORD'. This can sometimes feel like a lonely journey but we do not do it alone. We undertake this journey in the company of others.....fellow travellers.....mentors, fellow outcasts, refugees, poor shepherds.....cheered on by choirs of angels.

We are led through the turbulent, and what sometimes feels like despairing, violence of the world by a God who prays for us, and whose prayer carries us even when we are unaware of it.

If we carry our world with any sort of tenderness it is only because we are first and always being carried, loved into existence by the tender divine WORD.

Christ, the divine Word is God's eternal prayer for us and within us. Even as we release our loved ones into their freedom, we do so knowing that they are carried in the heart of the God.

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*May she find in all this, day or night,  
the beautiful centrality of pure opposites,  
may she discover before she grows old,  
not to choose so easily between past and present,  
may she find in one or the other  
her gifts acknowledged.*

*And so  
as I helped to name her  
I help to name these powers,  
I bring to life what is needed,  
I invoke the help she'll want...  
following those moonlit lines  
into a future uncradled by me  
but parented by all I call.*

*As she grows away from me,  
may these life lines grow with her, keep her safe,  
so with my open palm  
whose lines have run before her to make a safer way,  
I hold her smooth cheek and bless her this night  
and beyond it  
and for every unknown  
night to come.*

As we approach Christmas, may we bless each other, even as we are already blessed.

MY DAUGHTER ASLEEP  
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River Flow  
New & Selected Poems  
Many Rivers Press

Please note the visual structure of the poem above has been modified for the preacher's use. The original structure can be found at David Whyte's facebook page:

<https://www.facebook.com/PoetDavidWhyte/photos/a.213444315348246.68208.213407562018588/969806569712013/?type=3>