November 17 & 18, 2018 (33rd Sun. OT) Peter Daino

Parish Retreat All Saints Parish, Syr. NY.

The Call

We’ve chosen the Annunciation story from the Gospel of Luke to share some ideas about The Call which is the theme of our parish retreat this Sunday. Today’s Gospel is about the conception of Jesus. The conception of Mary which we call the Immaculate Conception has similar elements about call and destiny – angelic voices speaking to Joachim and Ann. And the story of the conception of John the Baptist in the womb of Elizabeth has those same elements of call and destiny.

In West Africa where I did my Peace Corps years there was a tribe which believed that a child would be conceived to the awaiting mother once she could hear and sing the song of the incoming child. So, a woman would go out to the grassland or into the forest every day to listen and listen for the special music of that unique child. It might take a few weeks or a few months but finally she would have memorized the whole song of that incoming soul, and then she would conceive and give flesh to that song.

Applying this legend to Mary and Elisabeth I wonder if the early pregnancy of the first and the late pregnancy of the later might have to do with the strength of their imaginations. It took Elizabeth longer to hear and to believe the song of her son whose mission was to herald the Messiah.

The Immaculate Conception we’ve been taught means Mary was conceived without Original Sin. What if the original sin was about the imagination, a failure of imagination. Adam and Eve were living in Paradise but Paradise was not in them, they were in a world so beautiful, and so wonderful, they could not even imagine it.

The virgin of Nazareth could imagine a world free of oppression, beautiful new world where the hungry are fed, the poor are lifted up, and so she quickly conceived Jesus the Messiah.

The song of Mary in Luke 1 is very much like the song of Jesus in Luke 4 proclaimed in his hometown synagogue when he tells the people of Nazareth that his mission is to give sight to the blind, to bring good news to the poor, to bring liberty to captives, and set the downtrodden free.

This mission was a blue fire in the heart of Jesus, was his call, his destiny. He used to say during his public ministry, “I have come to set the world on fire, how I yearn to see it ablaze.”

In my senior year at Seton High in Endicott NY we staged the musical “Man of La Mancha,” and so on graduation day our theme song was “The Impossible Dream.” Throughout my time at the Catholic Worker and in the Peace Corps that music was playing in my heart. You might say in John Lennon’s words, “I’m a dreamer, but I’m not the only one.” The song of Mary and the song of Jesus could have been titled “the Impossible Dreams.”

I would say that if your dream doesn’t sound impossible, maybe you’re not dreaming big enough. God always calls folks to Mission Impossible.

Back in the 1980s at every graduation where he gave the commencement speech the saintly, gentle, wise, ancient bishop of Nairobi, Maurice Otunga, a Luo like the father of Barack Obama, used to share this story:

There was a very old chief who had three daughters. To choose the one who would become the next chief he gave them a test. Climb to the top of Mount Kenya and bring back to me what is most precious. Well, I’ve climbed Mount Kenya and it takes three days. So, the oldest daughter made the climb and came back in three days handing to her father a precious gem that is only found at the top of Mount Kenya. He thanked her and said, ‘Yes this is precious.’ The second daughter made the climb and three days later gave her father an exquisite flower found in the alpine regions of that mountain. He thanked her and said, ‘Yes this is precious.’ Finally, the last born daughter made the climb and three days later returned. She had nothing in her hands to give to her father. The old chief said, ‘My daughter, your sisters before you each gave me something precious from the top of Mount Kenya, why not you?’ Then she said, ‘Father I climbed to the top of Mount Kenya and then from up there I looked over to the other side and I saw vast grasslands, fertile and green. We can take our people and cattle there and we will live in abundance, and there will be no more hunger of suffering.’ The old chief smiled and said “You, my last born daughter will be the new chief because you have brought back what is most precious, the vision of a brighter future.’

And doesn’t the Book of Proverbs say the same: Without Vision the People Perish!

Have you ever had the feeling, “I am powerful, I can do much, I have lots to say, I am going to change the world.” If you had such a feeling and started to act on it, you probably soon enough met with resistance. Someone put you in your place. “Who do you think you are?” Or maybe you did it yourself, “What was I thinking?” Then you go back to a daily monotony of working to pay your bills. The next time the feeling comes you dismiss it. You say to yourself, “Get real.”

The ancient Greeks would have told you that your first intuition was more real. They would have explained to you that you chose a destiny before you were born. Your soul went to the Queen of Fates and requested a mission and you were given that mission and then sent to earth to accomplish that mission.

The Greek word for this experience of Call is daimon. Dai as in dynamite or dynamic, dai carries the notion of something explosive or energetic. Mon means singular, special, unique. So, if you feel something unique in you, that’s explosive, burning in your soul, that is your daimon.

The Roman word for the experience of Call evolved into our English word, genius. A person in those days was encouraged to trust his or her personal genius.

As a Catholic I think of call or destiny as my angel. When I was growing up, I often prayed to my guardian angel. As a child I thought of my angel as the force that kept me safe and out of harm’s way. These days I do not often refer to my angel as a protector of my safety because, frankly, that has not been my adult experience. More often than not the angel, guardian of my destiny, puts me IN harm’s way, on the line, in uncomfortable situations where I’d rather not go.

As a Catholic I think of the Queen of Fates as Mary Queen of Angels. My soul went to Regina Angelorum and told her what I wanted to learn, to accomplish on earth. And because she knows her angels so well, the Queen of Angels summoned, from among the billions, the one angel most aligned with my destiny and that angel became my fate.

Your mission angel is the special guardian of your destiny. So, it may not look like the sweet comforting angels you see in religious gift shops. The MISSION angel is dangerous and wild, shall get you into trouble more often than get you out of it. Here is how you spot your mission angel.

If it tears you to pieces, and makes you whole; if it lifts you up and knocks you down; if it excites you and eats you; if it kisses you on the lips, and punches you in the nose; if it makes you cry out in pain, ‘a sword has pierced me,’ because you feel so forlorn, and makes you shout for joy, ‘Oh my soul magnifies the Lord because you feel so alive --- that’s it! Your Mission Angel.

Look at Mary’s. Gabriel was not easy with her. After she agreed to the adventure, ‘be it done to me according to your word’ she walked ninety miles to assist her cousin Elizabeth; in those early months she was an unwed mother; she gave birth in a stable; she became a refugee in Africa; and at the end of it all she became the mother of an executed criminal.

But, for all those sorrows her angel gave her as many joys, until at last she was assumed into heaven, and wise by then about mission angels, she was crowned their queen.

These metaphors for Call may be helpful to you or perhaps not. You may already have a different metaphor to describe your experience of Call. What matters is the experience itself.

In the parish retreat we will be reflecting on Call as I have described it here that seems to bubble up from within, and, also, we will reflect on a different version of Call that seems to come down from above like a mighty wind, the Holy Spirit. And note this -- we will also reflect on what happens between mission, when the Call is no longer calling. My term for this graced period is Inter-mission.

Inter-mission is a time for being rather than doing. In fact, the beginning of an intermission might be signaled by how tired you’ve become of what you are doing, you don’t know why you are doing it, your life is on auto-pilot.

In Care of the Soul, Thomas Moore says that intermission is a time when the mission angel is gone, and the soul is left to itself. Time has come for the soul to rest, to steep itself in the natural, in a closer relationship with the earth and its beauty. It is a time to read for pleasure, to listen to your favorite music, to journal, to have long conversations with wise friends, to be a fallow field waiting for the next rainy season, when the mission angel returns.

So if you can make it, please come to the parish retreat. It is this afternoon from 2-5. Some of you may want to come early and spend some quiet time in prayer before the retreat begins, and so there will be that possibility from 1:30 to 2pm

Let me end with a familiar expression, Altar Call. Billy Graham always ended his sermons with an Altar Call—Come to Jesus, Receive Jesus. When Bishop Fulton Sheen was asked for the equivalent of Altar Call for Catholics he said, “Behold the Lamb of God, behold him who takes away the sins of the world, Happy are those who are CALLED to the supper of the Lord.”

The beautiful thing about All Saints is that all are called to the table, to Jesus.

Happy are those called to his supper might be added to the eight happies found in the Beatitudes, a kind of ninth Beatitude. The call is a call to take in Jesus, to become our own version of Christ. The call is a call to holiness, to wholeness. Ultimately we are called to become the best version of ourselves. The traditional Catholic way of saying best version of yourself is you are called to be a saint.

And that’s a gift, the gift of Jesus, Behold, Be Held, Be Loved: “Happy all of us; all are called to the supper of the Lord.”