

The Hinge Within

Luke 1:39-45

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By

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To the extent possible, effort has been made to preserve the quality of the spoken word in this written adaptation.

A Marine Sergeant once was transferred to a base where housing was at a premium. When the order arrived, the family decided that they should stay together. So when they arrived at the new location, they checked into a motel while they looked everywhere in the immediate area for a place to live, a house or an apartment, something. But nothing was available. The situation looked hopeless. Still no one suggested that the wife and children should go back home where they had moved from – halfway across the United States. They were a family and they were going to stay together, whatever the housing problem.

Finally, after a few weeks of fruitless searching, the mother proposed a solution. “I spoke with the motel manager today,” she said. “And he told me that he has one unit with a kitchen. He’ll rent it to us. It’s small, but we’ll make it work. I arranged to help him with some of the daily cleaning chores in exchange for a lower weekly rate. This motel will be our new home.” The family talked quite a bit about the inconveniences that would arise in such cramped quarters, but everyone agreed with the mother’s plan. If it took this to keep the family together, each would pitch in and do his or her best to make it work.

Pretty soon school started and the children, adapting to their new surroundings as kids do, made friends and occasionally they brought them to the motel to visit after school. One young visitor, the daughter of an officer on the base, said something to her new friend about how tough it must be living in a motel rather than a real house. As they sat on the steps leading to the motel room, the youngster replied, “It’s okay! We have a home! It’s just that we don’t have a house to put it in right now.”

It’s long been said that, “Home is where the heart is.” We hear all sorts of music in this season longing for home – with lyrics like “I’ll be home for Christmas, if only in my dreams.”

So much depends upon how we frame the issues and concerns that we face. I know many of you are doing whatever is needed for your family right now. Some are caring for loved ones

facing medical issues, and others are grieving the loss of loved ones, and yet others are helping to raise your grandchildren and great-grandchildren. Some are forming their families and careers, establishing traditions of your own, while still others are launching their children, sending them off to college or into other parts of the country or the world. We do what is needed in our families because home is something within us, not where we happen to live. Many California families who lost their houses in the recent fires have discovered that this year. It's not about the stuff.

All events swing on a hinge. Every human being is a hinge. You are, and so am I. How silently that hinge within us does its work. We either swing open or swing closed to what is happening around us. We either turn towards or away from those we are closest to. So much depends upon us, you and me.

What is the Church really? It is a concept, a construction in the mind, until you and I come here. These buildings are not the Church. You are the Church! And today the hinge swung open as you opened yourself to the idea of attending and becoming the Church together. What is a home? A home is an idea and an ideal until you become part of it. You are the home. It is not a house. It takes someone who is a "hinge" to create a home, to plan and purchase and prepare and clean and comfort and confront and love. All events swing on a hinge. And every human being is a hinge! What are you prepared to open yourself to today? And what are you closing yourself to today that God may be inviting you to participate in?

Mary and Elizabeth turned towards their Lord like a flower turns toward the morning sun, swinging open to what God might do to, and through, them. They were willing to believe the rather absurd proposition that what was happening to them and in them was part of God's unfolding plan for the salvation of the world. Mary and Elizabeth, and you and me, are the "hinges" upon which God intends to transform life in this world but we must be willing to believe the impossible — that our story is part of God's unfolding story of salvation. So much depends on us, not because God can't create a church and a home and a community and a nation without us, but because God has chosen individuals like you and me to be the hinges upon which this story swings. So what kind of hinge are you? Will you open yourself to the miracle of Christmas, to the gift of God, the gift of himself?

As separated as we are, by thousands of years and cultural changes, I'm reminded that the world

into which this birth came was not some sentimental, sanitized world where stables don't smell and childbirth isn't enormously painful and messy. It was a real world, where people were too distracted by trying to make a living to notice or appreciate life itself. A world where we are more intrigued by either what we can do or what we can't do – than we are with what God might be up to. It was a world where many were bored with the routine of it all, or had grown intolerant of new ideas that shake up the way things are, or so accustomed to seeing things the way they expect to see them that they became blind to any other reality, even one that was breaking in all around them. A world where people's hinges swing closed. It was in that kind of world — this kind of world — that something so simple, and yet so magnificent, happened that it still commands the world's attention.

When Christ enters our world it disturbs our plans and demands our response, as it did for Mary and Elizabeth. Mary set out “with haste” to the hill country. She changed her plans and got on her feet. God has not come to be with us so that we can remain the same. Some of us will simply ignore this maddening paradox that the Prince of Peace has come to disturb our lives and disrupt our petty certainties and plans. We will try to control it all and limit the surprises and survive yet another Christmas.

Others of us will try to domesticate Jesus and take the position that Jesus is just irrelevant for our world. After all, in a world where there are conflicts between nations, and protests within nations over gas taxes and border walls, and where students are gunned down dancing at country western bars, and fires rage in forests and the communities built near them, and where we spend more than we can afford on entitlements for ourselves, what can Jesus do? The gods we serve, like greed and envy and pride, are just fine, or at least they're not too bad. There is no better world, no better way to live! Jesus can't do anything about the real problems in our real lives and the real world.

Some of us will get rid of this potentially disruptive interference of God in our lives by emasculating Jesus so he is harmless. We prefer to make him in our own image rather than understand ourselves to be made in his image. We see him not as a disrupter who seeks to revolutionize the way we live in the world, but as the embodiment of our middle class values. We scale him down so he is good and respectable, and fits in well with our tame and sedentary lives, so he can sit at our Christmas table and not demand anything from us.

Others find the authentic Jesus of the Gospels a little hard to take. He is unpredictable and disruptive. So we will institutionalize him rather than follow him. We will put him on a pedestal where we can always know where he is, and bow down before him. We surround him with architecture and stained glass, weaving intricate doctrines around him, giving him every honor and reverence we can think of, except the one thing he asks: That we follow him; that we put his example and his teachings into practice.

Like Mary and Elizabeth, you and I get to choose which story will define who we are and who we will become. How will the hinge within swing this Christmas? We may limit our concerns to our own small lives; to those in our own families or those who are like us; to our own misshapen goals and desires. Or we can see the world through a different lens, beyond our control and making, where the Lord is present and is moving all life toward a salvation we long for. We can broaden our concerns to include others and work for a world where everyone has food to eat, and a place to lay their head; where everyone can make a living and every child is safe and grows with enough to eat and without violence. We can strive for a world that belongs to God and not to greed or envy or pride or evil; but to a world where insignificant people like you and me can make impossible contributions participating in God's redemption of the world. We can choose whether we will live by faith, empowered by love, or swinging the other way living stingy lives filled with anxiety and fear about the future. Thank God that is not what Elizabeth or Mary chose. "Blessed are those who believe there will be a fulfillment of what was spoken by the Lord."

How might the Holy Spirit be stirring in you this morning? Is there any movement of joy within you today like there was in Elizabeth and Mary? Are you swinging open to a world beyond your own making, to the one created by God who is at work re-creating, restoring, and redeeming the world? Mary and Elizabeth, and you and I, are invited to be part of that amazing story.

God's surprising gift of himself on Christmas cannot be domesticated or emasculated or institutionalized away. God is with us. So be ready for some surprises that will remind you of his presence and invite you to come and ". . . see this thing that the Lord has made known" for yourself.

Christmas is God's unfinished business with us. Emmanuel! Amen

