

# Peter Bankson: An Irrational Season

Seekers Church: A Christian Community

*In the Tradition of the Church of the Saviour*

Peter Bankson

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## An Irrational Season

### Scripture

*But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days. Therefore he shall give them up until the time when sahe who is in labor has brought forth; then the rest of his kindred shall return to the people of Israel. And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God. And they shall live secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth; and he shall be the one of peace. (Micah 5:2-5a)*

*In those days, Mary set out and went withy haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed in a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord." (Luke 1:39-45)*

## Introduction

It may seem like an irrational stretch for a man to get up here and have anything to say about the prophetic power of a baby leaping in a mother's womb. Nevertheless, I need to keep stretching...

Here is my Christmas stocking. My great aunt Orpha made it for me when I was two years old. Over the past 62 years, it has hung in twenty homes, waiting each year for something small and special to fill it out. It is a big stocking, much bigger than my foot, and almost as big as I was the first year I saw it pinned to the mantle in Nana and Grandpappy Peterson's living room. It has served me well.

This sermon is not about the stocking or Aunt Orpha. Moreover, it is not about the power of having an artifact or two to help bring the same spirit to this season in one home after another. No, today I want to reflect on a little gift that started appearing in this stocking the first year it hung, a sweet little gift that helps me think about the mystery and the irrational hope of this season of waiting, a year when we are asking ourselves: "What are we waiting for?".

Here is what I want to offer as a simple observation about our waiting in this Advent season, about our faith journey as individuals and as a community. It is a simple, if unlikely process:

- First, something ordinary happens.
- It catalyzes something extraordinary.
- Then the Holy Spirit opens an irrational window and we have eyes to see.

This is a process full of the mystery of Advent, and we may miss it if we do not keep our eyes open.

## Something Ordinary Happens

When Aunt Orpha gave this stocking to me, there was lots of room inside for hidden treasures. It was as though she could see that there was more room inside me, in my imagination, than anyone could see from the outside. That is not surprising. I was only two years old – a little too young to be keeping a journal. However, her affirmation of my imagination has been an important part of my foundation. It all started with this Christmas stocking, but for many, many years the stocking was just a nice way to remember her and those early Christmas mornings.

Every time we take it out of the box of ornaments, I still think of Orpha, and those first Christmases, when this stocking hung from the mantle of my great grandmother's home in Spokane, Washington. That is where the family gathered for Christmas morning for the four years my mother and I lived there while my father was in the Army in the South Pacific during World War II.

It was a gathering of the extended family, with my mother and her two sisters, their parents, Grandma Brown, the Matriarch of the family, and assorted cousins. In those early years, there was a strange woman who came for the holidays. She was a cousin of my grandfather. I do not remember much about her but she played an important role in my Christmas story. I did not know much about her because she came all the way from California. Coming from California for the holidays seems ordinary these days, but then it was a real adventure ... a couple of days on the train. Each time she came, this mysterious aunt from far-away California brought me the most wonderful gift – a fresh, tree-ripened tangerine! After the first year, when I saw the bulge it made in the toe of my stocking, I was delighted to imagine what was waiting for me.

A fresh tangerine was so different from the picked-green, shipped-by-train oranges we sometimes found in the store. So

aromatic! So tasty! It was just an ordinary tangerine to my mystery aunt, who probably had a tangerine tree in her back yard. However, to me it was a special delight, a sign that there was more to the world than I could see. A tangerine in the toe of my Christmas stocking still makes my hairs stand on end, still calls me to the truth that there is more to God's reality that I can see, both out there and inside me. There is more to God's reality than I can see or understand ... yet.

Something ordinary happens in the Gospel lesson for this week – Mary goes to visit her cousin Elizabeth. She arrives at the door and they greet each other. This could be such an ordinary visit. I am sure there were millions of family visits like this, as women supported one another during their pregnancies, as they waited together for the birth of their children. It portrays a nice, ordinary image of maintaining relationships in an extended family. This was common stuff for Hebrew families then ... and now. We remember this visit because it catalyzed something extraordinary, something that made the visit worth remembering.

Here in Seekers Church we have also been seeing little, ordinary things that might have special meaning for us, as families and as a community.

The Washington Area Tumelong Tam is helping Roy get ready for a visit by the Bokamoso Theater Troupe. They will be arriving in early January for three weeks. While this visit is unusual, it is not the first time Rosinna, Solly and the kids will have been with us. This time there will be about a dozen appearances by the group and we hope to help them record and release a new CD. Since the WATT meeting last week there has been a blizzard of e-mail, as we do what we can to help get ready for the visit. This was ordinary behavior for Seekers – so far.

We are three days from another Christmas Eve dinner here at Seekers. You know the routine – setup on Christmas Eve

morning, gather for dinner at 6:00; stay for a worship service of lessons and carols at about 7:30. We have done this so many times it is becoming ordinary. Or is it?

## **That Ordinary Thing Catalyzes Something Extraordinary**

Even in the midst of the ordinary, there are those extraordinary moments. There are times of silence in worship when there is a sense that are all breathing together, that we are all in the presence of something much larger and deeper than we are used to. More than once on Christmas Eve morning, I have had that feeling as six or eight of us finish preparing this place for dinner in an hour of song and laughter. We have these moments when the ordinary catalyzes something extraordinary, and something leaps deep inside me.

On Friday, after the coordination meeting at Carroll Street, several of us gathered with Keith in his new office at home. Most of you know that last week was Keith's first full week as an independent mediator. This marks a real turning point in Keith's life and his response to God's call, and he asked a small group to gather in his office to offer a blessing. (It is a small office...) As we offered prayer for Keith and this his work, I had that sense of the hair on the back of my neck standing up.

I had another one of those moments on Friday afternoon, when I read that flurry of e-mail from the Tumelong Team as they worked through a very stressful day – everyone trying to help, figuring out as we worked how to work together. I checked my e-mail late, and as I read one message after the other, I had a wonderful feeling inside. I think if I had been pregnant, the baby might have at least rolled over in my womb. As it was, I did what I could: I recognized that sense of Holy presence, and said I loved the way the teamwork was growing. It was an extraordinary experience.

That is probably what Elizabeth did, simply let the sense of the extraordinary come to her consciousness, and share her insights with her cousin Mary. Folks in Jesus' time were much more comfortable with the irrational than folks are in our day. They knew that there were lots of things they did not understand, and most of the time, that was OK. We are living at the end of about 500 years of scientific exploration, explanation and extrapolation. Today, the cultural assumption is that if you do not understand something, someone will turn it to your disadvantage, so you had better understand it, or hire someone who does, to protect your interests.

I am convinced that we are still a long way from fully understanding all of God's Creation. Today, things we cannot explain happen just often enough to keep our smug humanistic self-assurance off balance. Elizabeth understood that the long-awaited prophecies of the coming of the Messiah were about to be fulfilled through a child was as irrational then as it is for many now.

## **The Holy Spirit Opens an Irrational Window: We Have Eyes to See**

There is still room for what does not compute, whether it is love, or compassion, or the brilliant wonder of a clear, mid-December night sky. As I think about it, there are many things that fall into this exciting, irrational place, that invite me to see with fresh eyes:

- the scent of tangerine peel and the image of that bulge in the toe of my new Christmas stocking;
- the hair rising on the back of my neck as we worship in silence and the Holy Spirit moves within us;
- that sense of glee as a group of us, working by ourselves all over town come together on line and find the answer we've been looking for;
- the care-filled celebration when one of us sets out on a

new path;

- that sense we all get when we can let the reality of God coming among us penetrate all the way into our guts.

This Advent we asked ourselves, "What are we waiting for?" The answer is that we are waiting for the coming of Christ ... again. On the other hand, is it that we are waiting to recognize, again, that we already are part of the Body of Christ; one of those "little clans of Judah," that we are already living in the midst of this world that is a living part of God? However we say it, we are all waiting for something that gets beyond the careful calculations of our culture. Anne Lamott said it this way: "In Advent, we have to sit in our own stuff long enough to know what it means to be saved, which I think means to see everyone as family. Certainly if you follow Jesus, you have to believe that we are one family, we're all sisters and brothers."

Welcome Bokamoso.

I am reminded of the poem by Madeline L'Engle that we used for an Advent reflection several years ago:

*This is the irrational season  
When love blooms bright and wild.  
Had Mary been filled with reason,  
There'd have been no room for the child.*

Madeline L'Engle, *The Irrational Season*, pg. 27.

Amen.