

Let Change Begin with Me
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St. John's Church, Tallahassee

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Recently I've been thinking, if this priesthood business doesn't work out, I'm going to go into advertising – sports advertising to be specific. You see, I love a passionate rivalry, of any kind really: Red Sox vs. Yankees; Duke vs. Carolina; Hilary Clinton vs. Sarah Palin (a rivalry still to come). And ever since moving to Tallahassee, I've become engrossed in the Florida State vs. the University of Florida rivalry.

Each year that we've been here, my family and I have gone to my in-laws in Orlando for Thanksgiving, and to make it home in time for church on Sunday, we drive right past Gainesville on the day of the big game. So the first year my children and I decided to decorate our car with big, white, shoe polish letters, saying, "Gators Bite, Go Noles!" Now, let me quickly say before receiving the inevitable emails, that while I thought I was simply stating a biological fact, my wife has since convinced me that it was a bit crude. So this year the children and I decorated the car with these words instead: "Gators Eat Their Young, Go Noles!" And next year we're considering, "Gators Are Ancient History" or "Gators Wallow in the Mud" or "Gators Lay Rotten Eggs," which of course they do on occasion. We have enough to fill a whole t-shirt shop. And if nothing else, it certainly makes the long drive go faster, although it makes my wife positively paranoid, constantly on guard for reptile road-rage at every turn.

All in all, however, people are good sports. Seminole fans drive by and honk and wave in sympathetic solidarity. Gator fans drive by and honk and wave in a different sort of fashion. But the funniest reaction I got actually came right here at home; from our own Father Abshire. Why in the world would I care about this sports rivalry to begin with? especially since I have no formal connection to FSU. And I simply answered, not only do I love a passionate rivalry; it's the Christian thing to do. What I mean is, it seems perfectly clear to me that God loves the underdog.

Now, I fear at this point I may get myself in a bit of trouble, if I haven't already. But the truth of the matter is that stories about virgin births are not particular to Christianity. In the religious world of Jesus' day, there already were numerous stories of the gods giving birth through virgins. Now, please, don't misunderstand, chastity, purity and piety are important. But what is unique about the Christian birth narrative, and I would suggest what is centrally important, is not the virginity, it's the humility. It's what led the hymnist to wonder: "Why lies he in such mean estate, where ox and ass are feeding? Good Christians fear: for sinners here the silent word is pleading. This, this is Christ the King, whom shepherds guard and angels sing; haste, haste to bring him laud, the babe, the son of Mary." You see, kings-to-be are not born in messy and mucky mangers, where ox and ass are feeding. Traditionally, kings-to-be are born in places of privilege like palaces. And god-children are certainly not birthed by young peasant girls like Mary. Yet Christ our King was born in such mean estate, and the world has never been the same since.

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There was a certain man living in London during WWII. Every night German planes terrorized the skies dropping countless bombs on the city below. Buildings burst into

flames, sirens wailed incessantly, and entire blocks were reduced to rubble. One day this man was sitting in the wreckage of his home where only the walls were still standing, the roof was completely blown away. The man himself was on the verge of despair. His home was demolished, his city was devastated, and still his country was under fierce attack. Suddenly, his thoughts were interrupted by a knock at the door. And when the man went to open it there before him was a small regal figure. It was King George the 6th. The king was touring the war-torn neighborhoods of London, stopping-in to see how the people were getting along. So what else was this shell-shocked man do but bring himself together and welcome the King of England into what was left of his home.

It's so difficult for us to imagine such an occurrence. One because of our own present privileged circumstances; but also because we know that kings simply don't come to sit amongst the rubble of our lives. And yet in this circumstance King George did. King George didn't flee London for the safety of the anonymous countryside; he didn't hide underground until the danger had past; he didn't send a more dispensable emissary on his behalf. And we can only assume that King George was following in the footsteps of his own king, the Lord of Lords, because who else would King George follow when attempting to change the course of history, except the one who already had? Kings just don't come to sit amongst the rubble of our lives, and yet, in all our difficult circumstances Christ our King did and still does. But the question remains, not concerning the need for the incarnation of God's son, but why through Mary?

I suppose it would be a bit of an exaggeration to say that Mary was the least likely person to be chosen by God to give birth to Christ the king, but not much of one. You see, Mary is as far from being a queen as one could possibly imagine. She is Jewish in a part of the world dominated by Romans. She is young in a society that valued age. And she is poor in a vastly stratified economy. And yet she is chosen by God above all others. And still we wonder why.

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When I was in seminary, perhaps the best lecture I ever attended was given not by one of our professors, but by a visiting Russian Orthodox priest. There were only a few professors and students there. But as we gathered around this gentle, genuine and humble man, he began to tell us about the state of the Church in Russia. He started by telling us about the history of the Church, how the Russian Orthodox Church at the beginning of the 20th century was the largest denomination in the entire world. And yet, by the end of the murderous Stalinist Regime it had become one of the smallest. They had suffered a holocaust that not many of us have heard of. Then he told us of a period where many of his fellow priests and bishops, if not the majority, were, in actuality, KGB agents – agents who were hostile to the Church and positioned to keep the church "in check", from preaching or practicing anything too radical in Christ's name. Clearly this priest had suffered immensely at the hands of others, and there were many that he could have blamed. And yet I will always remember what he told us next.

He said in his experience there are two kinds of people in the world. There are those who look out on the world and all the trouble and tragedy and they blame someone else. And there are those who look out, and then look within, and they blame themselves. As William Shakespeare put it: "The Fault is not in our stars...but in ourselves."

Well, I think fault and blame and guilt are better saved for the season of Lent. So instead, I want to conclude by focusing on the kind of change that can overcome our

faults. You see, almost all of us would agree that our world is desperately in need of change. Our economic system is clearly in need of change: historic industries are failing, unemployment is rising at frightening rate and foreclosures are rampant; our foreign policy in Iraq, Afghanistan and around the diplomatic world also seems to be in need of redirection; and our policies regarding the environment, educational and healthcare – just to name of few – are certainly in need of radical re-envisioning. So what was it about Mary that was so special? Why was she favored by God above all others? Yes, she was pure; yes, she was obedient; yes, she was faithful. But she was also a poor Jewish girl who was confused and afraid at times. And, yet, perhaps Mary's greatest gift was that she was open. She was open to being changed by God. My point is, almost all would agree that our world in need of change, and there is plenty of blame to be passed around on all sides. But how many of us have stopped to think, how many of us truly believe along with Mary, that change should first come through us?

Change is difficult, to be sure, perhaps primarily because it requires risk. But the truth of the matter is that change is also inevitable. Change will occur whether we like it or not; yet it is necessary for growth; and it is oftentimes a profound blessing. Studies have shown that people who take risks in their lives have higher rates of self-esteem; and those who stop taking risks lose theirs. But I am not suggesting we play some kind of psychological trick I'm suggesting to make ourselves feel better in these difficult times. Instead I want us to consider a more profound example.

Just think of the risk Mary took when she freely responded, "Here I am, the servant of the Lord." Or think of the risk God took in making this profound request. What if Mary had actually said, no – and the story doesn't make any sense without that being a real possibility. What if Joseph had said no? having Mary stoned to death instead, as was his right under common law. What if the shepherds or the wise men or the world had never recognized the Christ? As CS Lewis has put it: "Perhaps we do not realize the problem, so to call it, of allowing finite free wills to co-exist with Omnipotence. It seems to involve, at every moment, almost a sort of divine abdication."

There is a tremendous amount of risk in the Christmas story. But over and over again throughout the Scriptures, perhaps more than anything else, they say, "Be not afraid." The angel Gabriel told Mary, then Jesus told the disciples, then the disciples told us: "Be not afraid...for nothing is impossible with God." So, if this priesthood business doesn't work out, I've got an idea for a bumper sticker lined up: "Let change begin with me." Let change begin with me; let change begin with you; let change begin with all of us here at St. John's, because we know that nothing is impossible with God.