

The Rocking Carol

Luke 2:8-20

It was a few days after Christmas in 1987 when I led a group from the Baptist Peace Fellowship on a journey through what was then known as Soviet-controlled Eastern Europe. This was one of the more memorable trips I had ever taken, as we visited various human rights and religious activists in Moscow, leaders of the Solidarity movement in Warsaw, and various political dissidents in Budapest and East Berlin—all before the historic changes took place in 1989 and 1990.

The trip also included getting booted off an overnight train unexpectedly from Warsaw to Budapest. When the train stopped at the Czechoslovakian border, the guards noticed that we were Americans, conveniently caught without “transit” visas for their beloved homeland at the midnight hour on a frosty January night. Even though visas weren't required (we had already checked into that, as this was a direct overnight train with no planned stops until Budapest), the guards were convinced that we would panic and offer them the customary American solution for international crises: i.e., lots of U.S. currency! The guards even suggested a nice round figure of \$10,000 a piece, which would help make up for their being assigned to the graveyard shift in the Czechoslovakian border patrol.

But, you see, they didn't account for the fact that we were Baptists—which means we're cheap—otherwise, why would we be traveling through Eastern Europe in the middle of winter? Apparently, they didn't consider our self-proclaimed poverty as a community-building response, so they offered us, in turn, an unusual

opportunity to do some nocturnal sightseeing through the Slovakian countryside! In the wee hours of the morning, we were unceremoniously thrown off the train!

As the group leader, I was pressed into heroic action. We found our way across the tracks to the local depot where we were kindly notified in a language I could not understand, that we were in trouble. The only train coming through until daybreak was a northbound train to Warsaw, from which we had just come. Since our Polish visas were to run out within 24 hours and we headed in the wrong direction, it was much like those unfortunate British Baptists who won the raffle to be on the inaugural voyage of the Titanic: all we could do is face our doom by singing hymns, which then became Christmas carols, until we finally digressed to 1960s protest songs to calm our tired and restless souls. Eventually, at three o'clock in the morning, the Warsaw-bound train arrived and we got on board and headed north, where over the course of the next day we eventually managed, through miracles and frenzy, to actually figure out a way to get to Budapest in the best way possible—we flew over Czechoslovakia!

In all of this, there was a memory that has stuck with me over these years and which continues to be a source of blessing to me. While heading back to Warsaw, I remember seeing a young couple sitting across from me on the train. The young woman held a small child, perhaps not much older than six months, who must have been awakened by the noise of hyper-adrenalized Americans, nervously laughing over their war stories and confrontation with the “enemy.”

As I sat down across from this couple, the mother was humming a tune while rocking her child back to sleep. I later learned that it was the melody of a Czech carol, “The Rocking Carol.”

*Jesus, Jesus, baby dear, baby dear,
We will rock your cradle here.
We will rock you, rock you, rock you,
Gently slumber as we rock you,
Jesus, Jesus, do not fear,
We who love you will be near.*

I remember how soothing it was to hear that lullaby sung, reminding me how wonderfully appropriate it was that there should be the image of the Christ child, who in the darkest nights of our lives, is a sign of God's steady and faithful presence, with God's willingness to meet us at the places where we often sense we are most vulnerable.

God's answer for me that dark and anxious moment was not found in any clever capabilities as a leader; it was found in the sweet and reassuring sound of a mother's love, who watched over her loved one. I was struck by the coincidence and timeliness of watching a modern-day Mary and Joseph with their baby as a hidden message to me of God's protective care while we traveled through a sometimes hostile and foreign land.

*Jesus, Jesus, do not fear;
We who love you will be near.*

This carol about rocking and tender care reminds me of another time in my life when I saw a mother holding her infant—a far more somber moment when I searched for answers and some measure of comfort. It was one of those experiences when words are difficult to come by and offer little in the way of reassurance.

I was serving a church in Rochester, NY at the time and was called early one morning by a pastor from Pennsylvania, who informed me about a young couple whose infant child was in the pediatric intensive care unit at a local hospital. Although I did not know the pastor or them, I went up to see if I could be of any help.

Little did I know at the time that it would be some of the toughest hours in my life to that point. The little girl, less than a year old, was kept alive by a respirator, although by then, the monitors revealed her to be brain-dead. I stood there with her parents I had only just met—all of us stunned by the reality of where a beautiful, promising life earlier in the day was now suddenly gone, except for the cruel deception of the breathing apparatus. I struggled to know what to do—I didn't even know how to offer a prayer that would lend some meaning to this moment; in the emotions of the setting, it was hard not to imagine what it would feel to have one of my own daughters lying there lost to life.

When it came time to turn the respirator off, the only help I could offer was to ask the nurses if the young mother could hold her child. As they lifted the child into her arms, she turned and went over to a rocking chair—the type normally used by mothers to rock their newborns—where she cradled the little fragile body and rocked her child as if she were helping her to sleep.

As I watched her rock her child to everlasting peace, I struggled to hold back my own tears as I tried to understand how it is that we hold so much love, hope, and inspiration for ourselves in such a fragile little life. How could this mother know and accept such an unfathomable sorrow? How could she comprehend God's love when

she was being robbed of the most tangible expression of love she had ever possessed?

Without ever grasping the entire meaning of such a tragic loss, it has made me wonder what Mary must have thought so long ago: how her child's body was so fragile against the elements and Herod's rash anger. How she must have cradled the infant Jesus, and rocked him, knowing that all she could protect him with was her fierce love as only a mother could know. Could she, like any other mother, know what would be required of her to love the child she so cradled?

*We will rock you, rock you, rock you,
Gently slumber as we rock you;
Jesus, Jesus, do not fear,
We who love you will be near.*

One more vignette comes to mind for me as I listen to this carol. It comes from the early days of our eldest daughter, Emily. Emily was a beautiful baby but she also possessed an absolutely piercing cry due to suffering severe colic.

When she was brought home from the hospital, it was not all that easy for us, because her mother and I lived in a very small, two-room apartment. As we had planned it, in the early evening we would put her to sleep in the bedroom; and later she'd be moved out to the adjacent room so we could sleep. Unfortunately, the best laid plans don't always work out right. Neither her mother or I could rest for any length of time because of Emily's constant pain.

The night I recall most vividly was shortly after she came home. Tired as I was, I got up to hold her and comfort her as well as I could. I took her into my arms and gently rocked her in an old rocking chair

we had acquired. As I held this little life next to mine, perhaps for the first time, I felt like a father—an emotional attachment and responsibility for her like I had never felt before. Images flowed through my mind of what this little life would promise in the years to come, which I have had the wonder and responsibility of beholding.

That night I pondered what my relationship would be with her throughout the years of her life. More than anything, I sensed a father's deep, abiding, protective, unconditional love for one who was a part of me. Not until I experienced it firsthand while rocking my daughter to sleep in the middle of the night did I grasp what it meant to be a parent and how vulnerable and unprepared I was to take on that responsibility.

*We will rock you, rock you, rock you,
Gently slumber as we rock you;
Jesus, Jesus, do not fear,
We who love you will be near.*

Over the years, I've had a number of experiences that have lent insight into the Christmas story. I suppose, when we wrestle through the dramas of our own lives, we gain appreciation for perhaps why the divine presence is evident to us, not coming out of the clouds like some sort of great mythological being—but in human life, sometimes even the fragile, dependent life of a newborn. For what other stage in life do we so depend upon human love to care for and protect us? I'm constantly astounded by the remarkable story our tradition tells: why should God want to be cared for and loved in this manner?

Luke was the one who put it this way: "This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a

manger." A sign—a sign for whom? In what way is it a sign—perhaps even a sign for you and me?

The story we tell about Jesus pushes us beyond the sentimental elements of birthing a child to confounding our consciences with the audacious claim that God and humans have come together in a strange and marvelous way—each as a parent and each as a child. What do we learn about God and about ourselves when God comes to us as a child, whose life holds so much promise, so much hope, and so much love—when divine grace is placed in the care of human hands? Instead of God being our protector, we are God’s protector.

What does that do for us when we are responsible for bearing the presence of God in human life—when we are given the role to take care of God on earth? Think about that when you hold your child or grandchild, or whenever you welcome another into your midst. You are taking care of God for the moment you’ve been given. In that amazing claim of incarnation, with every newborn life, whether our own child or that of another, there is hidden the redemptive mystery of the universe and the source of meaning and purpose to bear life and to love one another, generation upon generation.

*Jesus, Jesus, do not fear;
We who love you will be near.*

The Rev. Dr. Paul C. Hayes
Noank Baptist Church, Noank CT
27 December 2015