

Blogging toward Sunday

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When friends gave birth last fall to Lydia, she was normal and healthy. But three months later the seizures began, and she was diagnosed with a rare genetic disorder, Aicardi Syndrome. Now she clings to life precariously. In preparing for her death, her parents asked me for funeral resources, and I suggested Jeremiah 1:4-10. As with Jeremiah, so (I believe) with Lydia: the word of God assures us she is known, formed, consecrated, appointed.

Is it easier to acknowledge God's remarkable work of creativity and purpose with a "normal" child than with a Lydia? This text suggests that God acts intentionally with a fetus: that the work of "knitting" begins even before choosing the yarn, the stitch and the needles. In the case of Lydia, God did not carelessly skip a gene or lose a stitch.

As it turns out, Lydia has proved something of a prophet.

Her parents speak of her ability to breathe God's commanding presence to her visitors. She disturbs too-easy assumptions, redefines our notion of blessing. She is not afraid, as we are, of what lies ahead. She has no doubts about trusting God, and her faith has influenced the parish that surrounds her and prays for her. Instead of praying, "God, hear my word and heal Lydia," they pray, "God, let me hear your word and heal *me*."

Jeremiah's work involves destroying and overthrowing, then building and planting. Lydia is well underway with the first stage. We must not underestimate her impact.

Who knows at what point her compressed life effects in us the building of a renewed trust in the God-who-is-with-us whatever the circumstances? We might only glimpse this with hindsight at her death, when we recognize the gift that has passed. As with Jeremiah, perhaps it will take this further grief for her community to recognize that

God is not with those who escape reality; God is the means by which we find reality, as well as its end.

It's easy to see why we resist. The transition is from harmless religion to scary religion. Harmless religion baptizes our blessings and confirms our comforts. Such a god could not be responsible for a Lydia, surely? The harm in this harmlessness lies with the blessings we define and the comforts we expect. As one of the Israelites in exile, could you have welcomed Jeremiah and his word of turmoil as blessing? Could you, like the faith-filled heroes listed in Hebrews 11, have borne the risk or abuse God sent their way and called it provision—in the conviction that God's promises prevail?

Hebrews 12 explains why scary religion is real religion. It is not the scary stuff—blazing fire, darkness, gloom, tempest or terror—that constitutes the end, even though these are common to the journeys traveled by those who encounter God closely. “But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven.” The contrast between scary and real could not be greater, yet there is a strange relation between the two. Is it about developing an imagination sufficient to engage this final vision? Is it about growing the guts capable of welcoming the voice that shakes the earth? Or facing the God who is a consuming fire and worshiping even amidst fear?