Waiting for the Call

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Christians raised, as I was, in an evangelical fundamentalist tradition must, at some point, choose between the clear-cut, rule-bound but essentially ahistorical and anti-intellectual worldview these religions offer and something more complicated. The fear of many fundamentalists is that any step away from a belief in the Bible as inerrant, as literally true in every respect, is a step away from belief. My father was a long way from the Southern Baptist preachers he refers to as “the fundies,” who have dominated the denomination in the past three decades. He believed in and taught biblical study based on knowledge of the original texts and on historical scholarship. He taught me to ask hard questions and recognize scripture as open to interpretation in light of ongoing revelation.

Yet he never could have anticipated nor prepared himself for some of the directions my quest for a faith of my own has taken. Where he has remained Baptist (even while embarrassed about some of the recent shenanigans of the Southern Baptists), I have abandoned not only my denominational roots but, at times, organized religion altogether.

I felt, in adulthood, as if I hadn’t so much left the church as been left by it. I had been raised in a religion in which, at a certain point, if you believed women were truly equal to men and if you believed God made
gay people and therefore must love us, something had to give. “Trust in the Lord with all thine heart, and lean not unto thine own understanding” (Proverbs 3:5) was a favorite verse of both of my parents. They offered it up to me time and again as advice worth heeding. This passage of scripture must have provided deep comfort to both of them, an assurance that God would be actively present, caring for and guiding them, but I always bristled when they quoted it to me. I heard the verse with special emphasis on the words “lean not unto thine own understanding,” and for this reason, I grew to hate it. Shut down your mind, don’t think, don’t ask questions, don’t try to understand is what I thought I heard. I was having none of that.

Church hadn’t been prominent in Carol’s childhood. She was raised Methodist, but in practice this meant that on many Sundays her parents dropped their three girls off at church and headed home for a little relaxation. Carol and her sisters were a brazen lot. They often took their offering money to the drugstore to buy comic books. One Sunday, unwilling to get dressed up, they simply buttoned their coats over their underwear. The Sunday School teacher couldn’t figure out why those Saddler girls refused to hang up their coats.

By the time Carol and I became a couple, neither of us was involved with any church. I missed it enough to have visited a couple of Baptist churches in Chicago. There I found a style of worship familiar to me but a theology that I could not accept. My longing for a “church home,” as my father would have called it, was not nearly acute enough to cause me to search further. But then the girls came into our lives.

As our children began to talk and ask questions about the world, I often found myself speaking about God and God’s love and care for the world and each of us. Carol and I began talking about whether we wanted a church for our family. We decided that if we could find a church that would not simply tolerate our family but welcome it, a church that would celebrate all of the gifts God has given us, including our sexuality, we would like to make that part of our lives. We were not interested in taking our daughters to a church that would teach them there was something fundamentally wrong with their family. Also, we decided, there needed to be a good music program since we both agreed that had always been one of our favorite parts of church. It took us awhile to find the right fit, but
eventually we found Broadway, a United Methodist church that was intentionally inclusive in its welcome to gay and lesbian Christians and that had, as well, a great choir and lots of spirited hymn singing. At home, we talked about God in whatever ways seemed appropriate to the moment. Gracie rarely showed any interest in theological discussions, although she liked some of the art projects in Sunday School. But Lucy plowed into such conversations with gusto.

One day, when she was five, Lucy, who has always hated rodents, looked at me over her cereal and asked, “Did God make rats?”

Ah, I thought, the question of evil. I tried my best. “Yes, just like God made all things, God made rats.”

“God didn’t make me,” Lucy asserted.

“Oh, no?” I replied. I was surprised. “Who made you?”

“Maria Chacpa,” she answered definitively, naming her birth mother.

The girl had a point. “Well, you’re right, she did do all the real work. You came out of her body. She gave birth to you. But in the sense that we speak of all life coming from God, God as the author of life, in that sense God made you.” I suppose I was seeking an answer that didn’t claim more than I myself believe and yet was simple and clear enough for a five year old. Our theological conversations often found me sifting through the answers from my childhood for something suitable and then improvising a murky path between the concrete and the not yet known. But Lucy would not be brushed off. I had not touched her real question.

A few days later she circled back to it. “Mama-Jackie, why did God make rats?”

Why, indeed? Who can answer a question like that? Are five year olds supposed to be thinking about these kinds of questions? “Lucy,” I said, “that is a really profound theological question. Rats are creepy, and they don’t seem to be much good. Why, indeed, would God decide to make such a thing? Maybe you should ask our pastor.” I could have said God sets the world in motion and then lets evolution take its course. Some of what evolves is pretty ugly. I could have said I wonder, too, about why a supposedly powerful God leaves evil loose in the world. I could have said I don’t know and sometimes it makes you wonder what on earth or in heaven God is up to.

One morning not long after the rat discussion, Mother and I were on

“Ask her what?”

“Ask her about the rats.” Lucy had decided that as a seminary graduate Grandmama was as good a source as any pastor.

“Mother,” I said. “Lucy has a big theological question. She wants to know why God made rats.”

Mother answered immediately. “Well, when Eve ate the forbidden fruit, sin and suffering entered the world: thistles and disease and snakes who crawled on their bellies and everything evil.” I was surprised she didn’t mention cramps and the pain of childbirth.

“Mother,” I protested. “She’s five years old. I can’t give her the Fall. Help me here. What else have you got?”

She didn’t point out that she had begun teaching me the story of the Fall and its attendant evils long before I turned five. Instead she gamely tried again. “Well, let me see. God made rats so the hawks would have something to eat.”

“Ah, the circle of life,” I said. The Lion King was Lucy’s favorite movie. “We can work with that.” I passed Grandmama’s second answer along to Lucy. Her doubts were temporarily assuaged, though her terror of rats abided.

About a year after we returned to Chicago, Lucy, who at age five could have gone to the nursery, opted to sit in church with me so she could “sing songs with all the peoples.” Christmas was approaching. Our pastor preached about how young Mary was when she got pregnant, only thirteen or fourteen and not married. Yet God chose her to bear his son. God’s call can come to young people, just as it comes to adults, the pastor wanted us to know.

As we walked home from church that unseasonably warm December morning, Mary Alice, one of our neighbors, burst eagerly onto her porch. “I think today may be the day,” she exclaimed. “Today or tomorrow. Karen has begun to have contractions.”

Karen and Mary Alice are two friends who were expecting their first child. They had enjoyed meeting Lucy and Gracie and talking to us about our family when they were planning their own.
The girls and I walked on toward home. “Which one is having the baby?” Lucy wanted to know.

“The one you didn’t see. Karen, the one who is pregnant.”

“How did she get that baby?” Lucy wondered. This question had recently begun to interest her as she came to realize that not all children join their families through adoption.

“Donor insemination,” I told her. “Just like in Heather Has Two Mommies.” The book tells the story of two women who want to have a child and eventually do so through donor insemination. The story dwells on the process of insemination with a level of detail unnecessary for preschoolers, but it’s one of the few books out there that make a lesbian family sound almost ordinary. So, despite what was, to my mind, a bit more anatomical detail than we really needed, we had read this book. Lucy loved it, requesting it again and again.

That night Lucy could not sleep. We had run through our usual extensive bedtime routine—tooth brushing, bedtime stories, a few songs from one of the moms, and then soothing music on the cassette player. In the top bunk, Gracie was sleeping soundly. Lucy kept popping up to go to the bathroom, to get a Band-Aid, to see what we were up to in the living room, to ask if she could turn on the light and read a book, to let us know she was still awake.

Tucking her in yet again, I asked her what was the matter.

“I can’t stop thinking about it,” she told me. “How does the doctor get the sperm from the man to put inside the woman?”

Heather Has Two Mommies, voluble on so much else about the insemination process, is mercifully silent on this point. But I believe with all my heart in honest answers to honest questions.

“The man touches his penis with a back and forth motion of his hand, and the sperm comes out into a jar,” I explained.

“But how does the doctor get it from the jar into the woman’s body?” Lucy relentlessly and logically persisted.

“The doctor puts something like a turkey baster inside the woman’s vagina and squirts the semen in.”

Lucy thought about my answer for a moment. She was silent as she considered this new information. “How did Mary get pregnant from...
God?” There it was. The crucial question that had been keeping her awake.

I thought for a moment. I tried an easy answer. “The Bible tells us that God’s spirit came on her and she conceived Jesus.”

Lucy was having none of this. “But how?”

“It’s a mystery, Lucy. There are no sperm in this story. No one can explain it except as a mystery. Some people think that Mary and Joseph were the biological parents but that Jesus so fully expressed God’s spirit that he came to be called the Son of God. Others are certain God is the biological as well as the spiritual father. I wasn’t there, so I can’t tell you exactly how it happened. But, however this story is told, there are no sperm in it.”

In my heart was the hope that this answer would leave room for her to hold onto faith even when, as an adult, she began to see the story of the virgin birth as a myth tacked onto the Jesus story by overzealous writers of the gospels who wanted to appeal to the broadest possible array of converts. I wrapped the kernel of the truth I had come to, that Jesus walked so closely with God that he came to be called the Son of God, in several layers of what various interpretive communities believe about Jesus’ parentage.

“So,” Lucy said, after a pause. “Adam and Eve had children and they had children and they had children and they had children and they had children and eventually they had Mary and she had Jesus.”

“That’s right,” I said, admiring her synthesis of the genealogical information contained in the opening chapter of Matthew.

“OK,” said Lucy, “but tell me this. If God was going to send Jesus, why did he wait so long?”

Why would a God who has a great gift to give withhold it for generations? Why, indeed? “In the fullness of time,” my father would have said. I said something different. “Lucy, love, that is a profound theological question. There are adults who spend their lives studying the Bible who do not have a good answer to that question. I can’t possibly answer it. Maybe, when you grow up, you can study all this some more and maybe you can figure out an answer to that question.” Or maybe, I didn’t add, you’ll find behind your big questions only more big questions. I tucked
the covers around her and patted her chest right over her great big heart. “Try to sleep.”

But she wasn’t ready to sleep. “Mama-Jackie?” she said, as I started to tiptoe from the room. “How did Jesus get his helpers?”

“The disciples?” I asked.

Lucy nodded. I sat back down beside her on the bed, tucking my head to fit in under the top bunk, nestling down beside her to share her pillow.

“Well, he saw them at their work, and he spoke to them. He said, ‘Peter, follow me. Mark, follow me. Matthew, come with me.’ And they stopped what they were doing as soon as they heard his voice, and they followed him.”

“Why?” Lucy wanted to know.

“Because it was their destiny. When they heard the voice of Jesus call their name, they recognized their destiny, and they followed him.”

“How can you recognize your destiny?” Lucy wondered. It is a question I have often asked myself, a question at the core of this very book, yet as I sought an answer for her I found myself saying, “You have to listen to your inside voice. If you listen to your inside voice, you will know.”

“Is that how you came to Peru to get me?”

“Yes, exactly.” And as I spoke these words I knew that they were true. “Did God tell you to come?”

“Lucy, honey, God has never spoken to me directly like that. I just listened to my inside voice and knew what I had to do.”

Lucy folded me in a huge hug. “You’re my destiny, you’re my destiny, you’re my destiny!”

“Oh, baby,” I said, hugging her back with all my might, “you are so right.”