

A Play on 'The Word'

Luke 1:39-55; Canticle of Mary

Whitefish United Methodist Church

December 18, 2011

- † It's difficult to follow our children's pageant with a sermon. Who can tell the story we need to hear better than children? Dr. Kenneth Carter, a United Methodist Bishop from North Carolina writes:
- † There is a wonderful story about a man who was home with the children one afternoon while his wife went out Christmas shopping. He was reclining on the couch, half sleeping, half watching a football game, when the kids came into the room.
- † "Dad, we have a play to put on? Do you want to see it?"
- † He really didn't want to, but he knew he needed to, so he sat up, came out of his slumber, and became a one-man audience.
- † His four children, four, six, eight, ten years old, were the actors: Mary, Joseph, and the wise men. Joseph came in with a mop handle. Mary came in with a pillowcase under her pajamas; another child was an angel, flapping her arms as wings.
- † Finally the last child, the eight year old, came out, with all of the jewelry on that she could find in the house, her arms filled with three presents. "I am all three wise men," she said. "I bring three precious gifts: gold, circumstance, and mud."
- † The father didn't laugh. The father didn't correct the wise man. The father reflected on the word that somehow got to the heart of the Christmas story: God loves us for who we are, our gold--where we are at

our best; our circumstances--where we might be even now, even our mud--where we are when we are most human.

- † God chose an ordinary human being--Mary--to be the vessel through which the Son of God would be born. What is impossible for us is possible with God. God can take our gold, our circumstance, our mud, and do something glorious with it.
- † This is the Annunciation, the disruptive call of God, for Mary, and, who knows, perhaps for you and me.
- † There is also within the gospel lessons a response, the Magnificat! Mary says, "God has recognized the lowliness of his servant." In other words, I am an ordinary person. I am not perfect.
- † There is an ancient story that comes from the part of the world that is so contested now, the Middle East. A man was talking with a friend about his love life. "I thought I had found the perfect woman," he said. She was beautiful and had the most pleasing features a man could imagine. She was exceptional in every way, except she had no knowledge.
- † So I traveled further, and met a woman who was both beautiful and intelligent. But, alas, we could not communicate. After further travels, I met a woman who had everything: a perfect mind, perfect intelligence, great beauty, all the features I was looking for, but...
- † "What happened?" asked the friend who was listening. "Why didn't you marry her at once?" "Ah well," he replied, "as luck would have it, she was looking for the perfect man."
- † The good news of the gospel is that when God begins to look for us, God is not looking for perfection. God chooses the ordinary. God loves the unlovable. In fact, God reverses just about every expectation we might have of how God would enter into this world and save it.

- † Because here, amidst all the music of the season, comes perhaps the first Advent hymn, sung by a young and pregnant Mary. It's called the "magnificat" because it comes from the Latin word "magnify." It is Mary's bold song that begins "My soul magnifies the Lord!"
- † "My soul magnifies the Lord..." it's a strange song for Mary to sing, when you think about it. For Mary is pregnant, and it wasn't particularly good news. She is engaged but not married. She has a strange encounter, a dream perhaps. A messenger from God has told her that she has been chosen to bear a child, God's own son, and that her pregnancy has been caused by God's Holy Spirit.
- † Bravely young Mary, maybe only 13 years old, consents. "Let it be with me according to your word," she says to the messenger. And that moment of annunciation and Mary's consent have been memorialized in thousands of glorious paintings and "Ave Maria's."
- † Then Luke tells us that first Mary has something to say—the Magnificat. Mary looks ahead to the big picture—the results of the birth that will happen.
- † "The proud have been scattered—the powerful have been pulled from their thrones and the weak and poor have been lifted up, the hungry have been filled with good things, and the rich have been sent empty away."
- † Did you know that there are places in Latin America, El Salvador and Guatemala, where just a few years ago the public reading of the Magnificat was forbidden as subversive activity?
- † Mary's definition of liberation by God sounded suspiciously like revolution to the ruling juntas. And when Martin Luther translated the Bible into German in the 16th century, he left the Magnificat in Latin, untranslated.

- † The German princes who were so helpful to Luther in his struggles with Rome also took a dim view of the social and political implications of the Magnificat. So because Luther's friends were the ones sitting on the thrones, he left it in Latin so not too many people would understand it.
- † So what are we to make of this strange Advent hymn—this poor pregnant woman singing this song of revolution?
- † Scholars often state that the whole Bible demonstrates what is called “a preference for the poor.” And yes, that means the people who don't have enough food, shelter, love, or justice to live the abundant life God desires for each of us.
- † But Jesus doesn't condemn the people who have enough of these things but who seek God—think of Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea, for instance. It's just that poor people usually know their needs. And rich people sometimes don't. They fill up on things that don't satisfy, and they think they know how to fill the empty places all by themselves.
- † You know that Jesus didn't have as much problem with the obvious sinners—the prostitutes, thieves, adulterers, and tax collectors—he accepted and forgave them and seemed to like their company.
- † The people Jesus did have problems with were the ones who have concluded they have no problems, no need for forgiveness, no need to apologize, no need to admit that they are sometimes wrong and have hurt others.
- † Faith, in the Bible, begins with an acknowledgement of need, a confession of a certain emptiness. But our culture, particularly during this time leading up to Christmas, proclaims that our needs may be met if we just earn enough, buy enough, give enough, get enough.

- † And so, if Mary’s Magnificat makes you a little uncomfortable, that’s what it’s meant to do.
- † Notice the tense of the verbs in her song. It’s as if the things Mary sings about have already happened. “The Mighty One has done great things for me,” but Mary’s baby hasn’t even been born yet. God has filled the hungry already, she implies, but millions of stomachs are still empty.
- † Either Mary has lost her mind, or she can see something that others can’t. I confess that I sometimes have trouble singing the Magnificat because it sounds hollow and it rings false, especially in these troubled times.

And yet, it is in such troubled times that Mary’s song is especially powerful. Here is the story of another Christmas carol written also during difficult, war-torn times.

- † “I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day,” was written by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow around 1862. The other night, John Floridis played his arrangement of this melancholy song.
- † The sadness of the song reflects Longfellow’s grief over the 1861 death of his second wife (burned to death when candles at home ignited her clothing). Longfellow bitterly opposed the Civil war, as his son Charles was gravely wounded in one of its battles.
- † “There is not peace on earth, I said/For hate is strong and mocks the song/Of peace on earth good will to men.”
- † But the song concludes on a proclamation of hope: “Then pealed the bells more loud and deep/God is not dead, nor doth he sleep/The wrong shall fail, the right prevail/With peace on earth, good will to men.”
- † And so that’s how we can choose to hear Mary’s song, too. Through the lens of hope, of trust, of confidence in knowing that what we alone can do is not enough.

- † Remember that Luke did not write his account of the events of Jesus' birth in a vacuum. He knew the end of the story. He knew that Mary would see her son rejected, mocked, and crucified.
- † He knew that Mary would stand at the foot of the cross, and that the swaddling clothes that she would so carefully wrap Jesus in at his birth would be turned into a burial shroud after his death—something no mother should ever have to witness.
- † Because what God was doing at Jesus' birth was no different in meaning and method from what God was doing at Jesus' death. So writes Joanna Adams in the Christian Century, and it makes wonderful sense.
- † God is able to create new possibilities out of what appear to be impossibilities. The forces of death and hopelessness are defeated. How does God do it? By the power of vulnerable love!
- † Mary, humble and vulnerable herself, was able to see that. And she was right. For it was love that entered her fiancé Joseph and stirred him to accept not only her but their newborn son, Jesus. To raise him as his own and then to let him go.
- † It was love that kept Mary close to Jesus, even when he talked about a whole new family, and even when he hung dying from the cross. And it was love that conquered fear, by the power of the Holy Spirit, as the followers of Jesus grew into the church that spread across the empire, despite persecution and ridicule.
- † It is love, too, that seeks the empty places in us, so that we can be filled with good news of Christ's coming again in us and in our world.
- † This year, we will be blessed if we can see, as Mary saw, the possibility of transformation for our often unjust and loveless world. We will be blessed if we can be moved from seeing and hoping to doing, joyfully

joining in God's ongoing shake-up of things as they are but are not meant to be.

† May your soul magnify the Lord, too. May you sing:

† *Then pealed the bells more loud and deep*

God is not dead, nor does He sleep

The wrong shall fail, the right prevail

With peace on earth, good will to men. Amen.

Sources:

Dr. Kenneth Carter, <http://www.day1.org>