

23 December 2018

Advent Four

St Luke 1: 39 - 65

One evening after Compline at Nashotah House, when we were tired and ready to go home, the Dean met with us in the sacristy and talked for a couple of minutes. Although I do not remember his exact words, the basic theme was that anyone who sings, even off key, sings to the glory of God. Anyone who has intellectual curiosity, lifts all of us up. Anyone who does anything that is right, honourable, and good is a blessing to all people. Above all, anyone who seeks to do God's will is a great blessing to the world and honours and glorifies God. Dean Aktins paused for a moment and then added, "Whether you are ordained or not, all of us are called to be a blessing to God, to others, and to the world."

Every writer is his or her own censor, deciding what to include and what to leave out. And manuscripts are often edited many times as a writer tries to get the perspective right. We see that in the Gospels. Even though it is the same story, the good news of Jesus is told from four different perspectives. St John appeals to the Greco-Roman culture with its emphasis on philosophy. Mark tells of God's action through Jesus. St Matthew wants to prove to his fellow Jews that Jesus is the fulfilment of the ancient prophecies dating back to the time of Moses. And St Luke, in his gospel and then his sequel The Acts of the Apostles, wants to convince the Roman authorities that they have nothing to fear from Christianity.

With that theme in mind, we look at this very familiar story in the weeks leading up to the birth of Jesus. Saint Mark and Saint John all but ignore the nativity story. The Gospels of Saint Matthew and Saint Luke are quite similar when each of them tells the story of the birth of Jesus. For centuries we have yielded to the temptation to merge the two of them together, scrupulously avoiding the lengthy family tree of near unpronounceable names. Well, unpronounceable to most of us, perhaps.

Many of us learned this story in Sunday school when we were quite young, especially through the annual Christmas pageant. We attended the Methodist church, and there was a strict tradition. The tallest blonde girl was the archangel who spoke to the shepherds out in the field keeping watch over their sheep by night. The rest of the girls in our classes were in the heavenly choir - all of them in white dresses, harnessed into a set of feathery wings, and a gold tinsel ring on their head to represent a halo. And the shyest of the girls was given a blue robe, told to sit quietly, look adoringly at a doll in the manger, and be still. She was playing the role of Mary.

One boy was selected to be the innkeeper who got to tell Mary and Joseph to go away, that they were full for the night. Another boy was Joseph who didn't say anything; the rest of us were shepherds, and only one of

them had a speaking part. That usually fell to the most talkative and boisterous boy, who had to announce that he and his mates had been interrupted by an angel and heavenly chorus, and decided to leg it over through the country to Bethlehem by following a star. One year the senior shepherd forgot what he was to say, made a half wave and announced, "We're here!" which was about as helpful as any explanation about angels and the Christmas star because we knew the story so well we understood what he was saying.

Some years, despite all the hard work of the Sunday school teachers and parents, and the best efforts of the young participants, the pageant seems to teeter on the brink of disaster. And some years it goes right over the edge and collapses in chaos. Everyone was embarrassed and humiliated, some people are angry, and others have different reactions.

We seem to forget that the first Christmas was not all that neat and tidy. It dates back to the time of this morning's Gospel lesson when Mary had run away from home after Joseph broke their engagement. And it got messy when he hurried after her. Messier still when they had to go to Bethlehem for the census, and they were rejected by his family.

But there, in the centre of it all, silently absorbing all that is happening, contemplating it, and not adding to the chaos is Mary. Quiet, serene, and a true blessing to everyone as an example of trust and faith in God even when turmoil swirls around all of them.

You see, because Mary submitted herself to the will of God, despite the heartache and hard work, she became an example of true service. She wasn't bragging, but speaking the truth, and she was wise enough to realize that she was setting a very good example for all of us. We read her words, and we know that she understood that she was a blessing to the world. That is strict spiritual honesty.

It has long been said that a true lady or true gentleman does the right thing even when no one is looking. In our culture, with security cameras everywhere, with millions of smart phones with cameras, and people uploading almost anything they see, it is rare when someone is not watching us. To my way of thinking, doing the right thing and avoiding the wrong thing when no one is watching us is virtuous and good. To do the right thing, with the right motives, when others are watching is a blessing to them.

We have experienced this many times. It's the stranger that hold up traffic while another person struggles to get across the street. It's the person who spots a piece of trash, swoops down and picks it up, rather than steps over it and walks on. It's recognizing another person with words of hello, please, thank you. When we see such moments, no matter how brief they are, they remind us of our mutual responsibility to God, to the world He created, and to one another. We are blessed. And when we are the one doing it, we are a blessing to them, and to God.

That was behind Mary's great message. She knew she had been called by God to be the mother of Jesus.

Others were aware of it, whether they agreed with her or not. And she was so absolutely confident that she

was following the will of God that she could honestly say that future generations would call her blessed. She was definitely not putting the focus on herself, but on God, and keenly aware of the impact she would have on others.

She is an inspiration to us. And the wonderful, blessed part of it is there are so many possible ways of looking at her that can be a blessing to our life. The woman who submits her will to God's plan for the world; the woman who stands fast in what she believes is right; and the list goes on from there.

Now, a day before Christmas Eve, two days before Christmas, the excitement but also the tension begins to build. We hold in our hearts and minds the creation of the perfect Christmas celebration, whether here at All Saints' or in our homes. Not everyone shares in that vision. There are many, who for an assortment of reasons, have good reason to believe that it may be bleak. Deaths in the family, estrangements, loneliness, financial concerns, health, or anything else can leave individuals to feel that they are left out. Some years, our plans don't work out, our hopes seem dashed, and it just plain stinks.

It is there, in the moments when things seem so bleak, that the image of Mary slips in in front of us, quietly, serenely reminding us, "I know. I've experienced it, too."

So we reflect once again on her words to Elizabeth about being blessed and being a blessing to others, and we find strength and courage to meet our challenges. For God is with us in the midst of sorrow and emptiness, every bit as much as in the midst of a celebration.

The one thing that does matter is our response to what ever does happen - that we are a blessing to others whether it is something good or bad. Will our words and actions be a blessing on those around us? Or will they hurt and leave emotional and scar tissue far into the future? It matters whether or not we will allow others to be a blessing to us, to let them inside our hearts and minds.

Perhaps our goal should be to remember that the greatest act of love we can return to God and give to others is to make our lifetime goal one of being a blessing to others. At first it requires considerable thinking and effort, but then it comes gently and easy to us.

And not just this Christmas Eve and Christmas Day, but the days after that, in all of our encounters with God's creation and God's people.