

Sermons at St. Luke's

A sermon preached by the Rev. Anne E. Hodges-Copple on Sunday, December 12, 2010.

(Isaiah 35:1-10; James 5:7-10; Matthew 11:2-11)

I wonder if anyone has ever considered designing an Advent pageant. Suzanne, take note. I've never seen it done, but if you think about it, the lessons of Advent really could lend themselves to a great pageant. The first act, Act One, Advent I, begins at the end with the second coming. I can just imagine it. The Son of Man descending, flowing robes of royal purple. Mary Jane Moore's going wild at the very thought. Patricia LeMoine is thinking which fabric store she can get to. Debbie is thinking, "Now, how would you stitch that together?" Second Act, Advent II, this time John the Baptist -- this was last week -- front and center, "Prepare the way of the Lord!" Ah-ha, a wild man, complete with a costume of camel's hair. Oh, it's hard to find camel's hair. Can't you just see Van Blalock out there calling us a bunch of brood of vipers? Very exciting!

Well, today, Act Three. This is a very interesting scene. John the Baptist is still the central character, but he's off stage. He's in prison. He's about to lose his life for having offended King Herod. So John the Baptist sends some of his disciples to question Jesus. "Are you the one or are we to wait for another?" Jesus says, "The evidence speaks for itself. The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are healed, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought them." These are the signs the prophet predicted about the coming of the Messiah. Basically Jesus is saying, "What more evidence do you need?" Jesus confirms that John has fulfilled his destiny to be the greatest of the prophets. He has indeed prepared the way for the coming of the Messiah.

Ah, but here in our Advent pageant just as the voice of one prophet has moved off to stage left, we actually hear the voice of another character coming off stage right. But this was not a voice that you heard in the Gospel reading, rather in the Canticle that we said right between the lessons. "My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord, my spirit rejoices in God my Savior. My spirit rejoices in God my Savior". This Advent character, who we can't see and can only hear, is Mary. These are the words of Mary, mother of Jesus, as she sings, in the Gospel according to Luke, her song of praise and thanksgiving for this great gift of bearing the Christ child. This song of Mary, a song that begins with rejoicing crescendos, however, into a hymn of revolution and liberation. In a few days we'll be singing "What child is this who lays to rest," but starting today and continuing with the lessons in Advent Act Four we will hear from this Mary and we will ask, "What kind of mother is this?"

We know some basic things about Mary from the Gospels. Actually, the Gospel of Mark doesn't even mention her by name, never mentions a baby Jesus or an infant narrative. The Gospel of John only mentions her by name in the miracle at the wedding of Cana. Again, no pregnant Mary or baby Jesus. In Matthew and Luke we do have these infancy narratives, but in Matthew, only Joseph speaks. Mary is a central figure there, but we don't hear her voice. But it's in Luke that Mary speaks and sings, "My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord." She's betrothed, yet not married, to a carpenter named Joseph. As best we can tell, she is a young woman born in a

poor family. What could the voice of Mary tell us this morning? A couple of lines in particular catch my attention. Listen again to how she describes God, our Savior. "He has shown the strength of his arm, he has scattered the proud in their conceit." Or as the New English Bible puts it, "The arrogant of heart and mind he has put to rout. He has cast down the mighty from their thrones, lifted up the lowly. He has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty." This too is the voice of a prophet. These too are words we must consider carefully as we prepare ourselves to receive Christ into our lives.

Well, now, I am the veteran of many a Christmas pageant, I must say. I worked my way up from a sheep to a cow, but never -- of course, as a child I always wanted to be Mary, right? You wanted to be Mary. Until I was a teenager and happened to notice that she was Mary, mild, gentle and not doing much. Seemed to be acquiescing to a lot of things, seemed to be judged a lot by her looks. I, however, decided I wanted to play Judas in the Feast of Lights. Much more dramatic. It wasn't until the days of my young adulthood that I began to really hear these words of Mary. Wait a minute, what is she saying? "The Lord is casting down the mighty and powerful. The Lord is more interested in feeding the hungry than being worshipped in beautiful churches by beautiful people in beautiful clothing. The Lord will send the rich empty away." I don't know, at my Morning Prayer church in downtown Dallas that I grew up in, that would be not very good news to a lot of people.

It wasn't until I started taking mission trips to Central America and began seeing the remarkable men and women who were dedicating their lives to justice for the poor that I began to hear the song of Mary as a song of revolution, as a battle cry, as a song that points to God what God has done in the past, what God is doing in the present and what God is preparing to do in the future, to scatter the proud in the imagination of their hearts. Those of us who are proud imagine that we have been blessed by God because we have fine homes or good jobs or plenty to eat. Just such notions are challenged, are scattered, when Jesus is born to an unwed teenager in a stable. We who have a good education, plenty of possessions, imagine that being privileged is the same as being blessed. Jesus scatters just such illusions when he said, "Blessed are the poor, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." If we're going to make room for Jesus in our hearts, then we must make room for the poor who are seeking dignified paths to economic security. If we want to live in homes, the kind of homes that Jesus would want to visit, then we must help build homes for all people who need them. If we pray that God will be mindful of our needs for food and shelter and warmth, then we must pray that God give us the courage and the imagination to be mindful and responsive to the needs of others.

Jan Lamb and I went partying last night. In fact, your deacon, your rector and a member of the choir, Peach McDouall, we went partying last night. We put on our party clothes around nine o'clock, headed way over into East Durham. There was loud music. There were even some dancers. There were lots and lots of people out late, late at night. We were there for two hours. We left at midnight, they were not done. This was the celebration of the Feast of our Lady of Guadalupe at La Iglesia El Buen Pastor. Hundreds of people from Mexico and Central America gathered to hear again a story, a strange story, this time how Mary, the mother of Jesus, appears to a poor peasant. How Mary, the mother of Jesus, in all her glory as the Queen of Heaven appears to Juan Diego and tells this poor man, "You must go talk to the powerful. You must go talk to the bishop. You must be the one that tells the bishop that his people need a church to

Mary here in the countryside." Juan Diego goes to the bishop, the powerful, and imagine this, the bishop doesn't really believe him. The bishop says, "No, no, you must be wrong. But in case you're right, bring me a sign." Juan Diego returns to the hillside of Guadalupe, he receives the sign from the Virgin Mary of roses blooming in December and he gathers up the roses in his tunic. Folds these roses up, takes the tunic back to the bishop, throws open his tunic and in addition to the roses that fall to the ground is a beautiful, beautiful portrait of our Lady of Heaven. That beautiful, beautiful portrait from the 16th century is painted on muslin, simple cotton cloth, and it now hangs in the Cathedral of Mary in Mexico City.

People who came to El Buen Pastor last night -- babies, toddlers, fathers holding children, mothers with many children hanging from them -- stayed up late in the night to praise again the mother of God who understands their hardships. Praised to the mother of God who will not abandon them. Praised to the mother of God who will send them the strength that they need to go on in all kinds of uncertainty. As we left last night in the chill of the air, we left warmed in the heart that again in a strange, strange way the poor have come to Durham. This time in the form of our Hispanic brothers and sisters. The poor have come to us who consider ourselves somewhat comfortable, somewhat powerful. The poor have come to tell us again, to bless us again with the stories of how Jesus is active in their lives. I can assure you that in that room were people who faced all kinds of social, economic and spiritual insecurity, political insecurity. But I can guarantee you that they were secure in their knowledge that Mary, the mother of God, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit watches over them, protects them. How many of you could get your small children and your teenagers to church at midnight to rejoice?

I believe that as we have been given a gift of these strangers, as complicated as their story is, we have been given yet again a reason -- rich and poor, young and old, brown, black, white, all the nations of the world -- to prepare again to gather at a lowly stable together, whatever our gifts and whatever our poverty, to see how once again the Lord will bless us, the Lord will change us and the Lord will shine in our lives. Amen.