

## The Cutting Edge of Christmas

Luke 1:39-55

### When Christmas Comes

When I was eleven years old, my family moved to a town in northern Virginia. That Christmas, they put on their first Living Nativity pageant – essentially a re-enactment of the Christmas story in an outdoor setting using live animals, live actors, and with a choir singing and a narrator reading the story. That year I sang in the angelic choir of children. Some seventeen years later, I joined the staff of that same church and began to participate in the Living Nativity pageant. For the next nineteen years I supervised the drama, helped get the animals, and either directed or sang in the choir.

Three years ago, Crossroads Church celebrated our first Christmas in our very own building. And we presented the first Crossroads Living Nativity pageant. Last year, it was just too cold so we had to cancel. But this year, we're back at it – with live animals, live actors, and a choir. And I'm getting to be the narrator telling the story. It doesn't really matter at all that we combine the Matthew and Luke birth narratives – one with shepherds and angels and the other with wise men and angels -- or that we add in a few verses from John's Gospel to enrich the telling.

Christmas comes for me when the animals arrive and the smell of sheep and donkeys starts to pervade the air at 79<sup>th</sup> and Main. It comes when the choir starts tuning up and when children don costumes as shepherds and angels. It comes when the three kings pick up their gifts and wait around the eastern wall of the building for their cue to come to the manger. Christmas comes when Joseph tries to coax a reluctant donkey toward the stable and when the holy family gathers around the manger. And Christmas comes when crowds of people gather in the cool night breeze to hear the story one more time.

The smells and sounds of the animals, the excitement of the children, and the joyful spirit in the air – they all shout Christmas! But we must not wait for Christmas to come. Poet Ann Weems has written:

What concerns me  
    what lies on my heart  
    is this  
That we in the church  
    papered and programmed  
    articulate and agenda-ed  
are telling the faith story  
    all wrong,  
are telling it as though it happened two thousand  
    years ago  
Or is going to happen  
    as soon as the church budget is raised  
We seem to forget that Christ's name is Emmanuel,  
    God with Us,  
Not just when he sat among us

but now,  
when we cannot feel the nailprints in his hands  
(*Kneeling in Bethlehem*, Ann Weems, 75)

### **Mary's Christmas Message**

"My soul magnifies the Lord." In Latin, "Magnificat anima mea Dominum," these are the first words of the song Mary sings in response to her cousin Elizabeth's pronouncement, "blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord." For Luke's gospel, Jesus is said to become the Son of God at the moment of his conception by the Holy Spirit. The words of Elizabeth confirm Luke's assertion and Mary's response tells us a great deal about the way Luke understood the Christmas message.

Mary's *Magnificat* captures the challenging theme of Christmas, including the idea that God would be "putting down the mighty from their thrones" and sending "the rich away empty." Christmas according to this Mary is much more about a theology of justice and liberation than it is about presents and family gatherings. As we seek to be honest and faithful in our celebration of Christmas, can we keep what is good about a family Christmas – keep the gathering and at least some of the presents -- while also keeping our eyes open to the cutting edge and revolutionary tone of Mary?

Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; <sup>49</sup>for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. <sup>50</sup>His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. <sup>51</sup>He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. <sup>52</sup>He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; <sup>53</sup>he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.

The great leveling of Christmas – scattering the proud, bringing down the powerful, lifting up the lowly, filling the hungry with good things, and sending the rich away empty is not retribution against the have's and vindication for the have not's! Although such a view can look pretty good when you're on the bottom, and can cause one consider changing sides when one is on top, class warfare is not the nature of God. Rather, rich and poor are brought to level in Christ for the same reason the rich young ruler was challenged by Jesus to give away all his possessions. It is for the same reason Jesus fed many of the hungry and healed many of the infirmed. So that they could see the salvation of God – could see what God was doing in Jesus.

We are a part of each other and all a part of God. When one is down and out, we are all poorer for that person's suffering. When one is up and out, we are all diminished by that person's insulation.

### **The Cutting Edge – An Unexpected Christmas Story**

We all know the Christmas story is about Mary and Joseph going to Bethlehem, about angels singing, and about shepherds and wise men going to the stable to hail the baby Jesus. And we know that this story is all about God's presence in human history, through human lives, and the oneness of all creation in God. But there are other Christmas stories as well, stories that reveal that *God is with us* and point toward God's dream of *peace on earth*.

One such unexpected Christmas story is found in a book called *The Life of Pi*, a novel about a 16 year old boy from India who finds himself adrift in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, following a shipwreck, sharing a 26 foot long life boat with a 450 pound Bengal Tiger.

Pi has made a makeshift raft for himself and tethered it to the life boat and a distance of some 30 feet to get some distance from the tiger which, by the way, has the unusual name Richard Parker. He had the foresight to take with him a supply of food and water. He began to ponder a survival plan for himself. Plan #6 was essentially a war of attrition – to keep his distance and wait until the tiger would die of starvation. It seemed like the most reasonable plan – certainly better than attacking the tiger.

Suddenly, reality hit home for Pi. Plan #6 was the worst plan of all. Hunger and desperation would eventually overcome the tiger's fear of the ocean and he would swim to the raft and eat the boy. No, there must be a Plan #7. It is not the tiger who must be overcome, but the greater enemy – fear.

[Fear is] life's only true opponent. Only fear can defeat life. It is a clever, treacherous adversary. It was not a question of him or me, but of him *and* me. We were, literally and figuratively, in the same boat. We would live – or we would die – together. (Yann Martel, *The Life of Pi*, 161, 164)

The true proclaimed in Bethlehem's manger is that love overcomes fear. It is not a question of them or us, but of all of us together. We are *in the same boat* and will *live or die together*. As a human race, we are one – and also one with all creation in God, whose love always takes flesh in the lives of people.

### **Call to Action – Choose Joy**

Joy to the world and peace on earth are the promises of Christmas. But these can only come when we awaken to the God presence in ourselves and begin to recognize that presence in others. To make peace on the earth, we must first act to make peace in our communities and our relationships. We must embrace it in ourselves. To find joy in the world, we have to choose joy for ourselves. Mary chose joy. She called herself blessed.

Sisters and brothers, God is eagerly waiting to be born anew in our hearts: to melt the cynical chill, lighten the oppressive darkness, and restore hope. Christ's Spirit invites us now to leave the darkness of fear and step by faith into the light of love. We are blessed when we choose to follow Jesus' way, when we choose to leave the prisons that hold us and the chains that bind us. We are blessed when we choose to step out of the shadows of our own despair and embrace the promise that we are blessed and hold

Mary,  
Nazareth girl:  
What did you know of ethereal beings  
with messages from God?  
What did you know of men  
when you found yourself with child?  
What did you know of babies,  
you, barely out of childhood yourself?

God-chosen girl:  
    what did you know of God  
    that brought you to this stable  
    blessed among women?  
Could it be that you had been ready  
    waiting  
        listening  
            for the footsteps  
            of an angel?  
Could it be there are messages for us  
    if we have the faith to listen?  
    *(Kneeling in Bethlehem, Ann Weems, 25)*

**Luke 1:39-55**

<sup>39</sup>In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, <sup>40</sup>where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. <sup>41</sup>When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit <sup>42</sup>and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. <sup>43</sup>And why has this happened to me that the mother of my Lord comes to me? <sup>44</sup>For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. <sup>45</sup>And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."<sup>46</sup>And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, <sup>47</sup>and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, <sup>48</sup>for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; <sup>49</sup>for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. <sup>50</sup>His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. <sup>51</sup>He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. <sup>52</sup>He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; <sup>53</sup>he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. <sup>54</sup>He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, <sup>55</sup>according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever."