

December 27, 2009

Westminster Presbyterian Church



Sermons

The Ordinary in the Extraordinary by Dr. Jacqueline Nowak

Luke 2:21-40

Presbyterian Pastor Thom Shuman wrote this Christmas poem for his blog:

*“you could have
come
as warrior, ready
to take us on
one at a time
or en masse . . .*

*you could have
come
a whirlwind
swirling, twirling,
twisting around us,
flinging us up into
the air . . .*

*you could have
come*

*with a bag of
chocolates
in one hand
and
a time-out chair
in the other;*

*you came
a tiny
vulnerable
baby
lungs screaming for
life,
fingers grasping for
something to hold onto,
your whole being
completely depending on
us (!) to
feed you
change you
clothe you
protect you
love you*

*and we were
gob-smacked.*

“Gob-smacked.” God struck. Awestruck. Amazed into silence or glorious song! This is the Christmas experience at its best, isn’t it? And oh, how tempting it may be over the next few days to carefully package the whole of Christmas in bubble wrap and tissue paper; put it tenderly in a box and move on, back into our frenzied, encumbered lives. Yet Christmas is meant to grab and engage us, to mold and form us, to be Christians making a difference in the world.

We are called to be fed and united by the extraordinary, the glorious, the magical moments of Christmas, for the living of our lives through its mostly ordinary moments—for it is in those ordinary acts that the gospel becomes flesh for the world. God with us—in us—through us.

I found that I couldn’t write this sermon for Christmas Sunday before the Holy Holiday had occurred, before the candles were lit on Christmas Eve, *Silent Night* sung; packages opened; family greeted and fed. That has been my holiday so far; yours may have been much the same or very different.

All of us, in one way or another, rushed or strolled, mindful or mindlessly, through Advent, the beginning of a new liturgical year, four weeks spent by individuals, by families, by communities, preparing to encounter God, God incarnate in a human infant; a helpless, vulnerable infant with no

home, a cherished infant surrounded by the least, the lost, the last. Then Christmas arrived and now we are in the midst of 12 days of Christmas, leading up to Epiphany. During this time, when many things move more slowly than other times of the year, when schools are not in session, offices and e-mail and phones less busy, we are offered the gift of time to reflect upon the extraordinary event which called forth angel song and shepherds' adoration, a brilliant star, a magi procession. We are offered time to consider what day-to-day impact Christmas 2009 is going to have on our ordinary lives.

By the time this community gathers again for Sabbath worship, it will be 2010; we will have entered a new calendar year and a new decade. We will have resolved to lose weight or exercise more, to slow down or to get organized, to be more helpful or less cranky. Hopefully we will have included in our New Year's resolutions the commitment to keep Christmas every day of the year! Author Thomas Moore reminds us that, "Christmas is that part of the annual cycle that invites us to leave darkness behind and enter a new way of being, to start anew." Christmas allows us, in fact demands, that we become children again and let awe and wonder back into our lives. "The re-enchantment of daily life is crucial to getting over our moralism, draining workaholicism, and melancholic belief (only) in hard research. If we have lost enchantment, we are liable to divisiveness, intolerance, and aggression. If we don't love life, we are more susceptible to hating our neighbor. Christmas should be a feast for everyone—an opportunity to restore hope and to take part in meaningful and deeply-felt rituals, and to reconnect with our common humanity."

This year, Christmas Sunday is the third of the 12 Days of Christmas. The rain made Christmas itself feel more like spring than early winter; but, Christmas came like it always does! Many of you have been in the midst of parties with family and friends; this worship service gives you an opportunity to turn down the volume, to peer inward and find again a peace and stillness. For others, your celebrating has been limited by the passing into God's hands of a loved one; by loneliness or joblessness or dislocation from the familiar. For you this Sabbath day means being surrounded by the community which was and is called into being by the One whose birth we honor each year. Our celebrations and traditions, both individual and shared as a community of faith, fit us for the work of Christmas, which is not finished when the last gift has been unwrapped, the last check written on behalf of the needy, the last piece of the crèche put up in the attic for another year. Just as the work of parenting had really only begun for Joseph and Mary after their awestruck visitors left, our work of living as Christians in a world in need of a year's worth of holy laughter, of outstretched arms, of play and dance and goodwill, our work has just begun!

Our scripture today tells us that when the eighth day had arrived, Mary and Joseph left the cave, and Luke says, they took their first born son for circumcision and naming. A little while later, the baby Jesus was presented in the temple at Jerusalem, as Mary and Joseph practiced the rituals of their faith. It was there, upon encountering the infant, that Simeon offered blessings and Anna began talking "about the child, to all who were waiting expectantly for the freeing of Jerusalem." The story of God's incarnation as an infant lowly, an infant holy, began with Zechariah and Elizabeth. It ends with Simeon and Anna also affirming the extraordinary character of this particular infant and his future as the Messiah.

As we sang a bit ago -

*This, this is Christ the King
Whom shepherds guard and angels sing
The babe, the son of Mary*

Yet, if we take seriously the lessons that end Luke's second chapter, we will acknowledge that it is in the ordinary, the normal, the expected acts of day-to-day living, where as with Joseph and Mary, our faith is rooted, deepened, and lived out. Rituals which defined Jewish families serve as the culminating scenes of the Christmas story, where Joseph and Mary followed the traditional patterns of their religion, much as we do when we enact for each new Christian, the sacrament of baptism; when we gather around the Lord's table for the Eucharist, when we light candles on a cake and rejoice in a child's birthday. These patterns of tradition, of ritual, form us, feed and unite us, and this makes Christmas not an isolated joyous celebration, but a critically important aspect of our on-going faith formation, grounding us in hope and joy and promise.

Susan Lynn Russell an Episcopal priest says, "May we be given the courage to refuse to leave Christ only in Christmas, but to follow in his footsteps by doing justice, loving mercy and walking humbly with our God 'in season and out of season.' And may we be given the energy and imagination to ask 'what child is this' of each and every member of God's beloved human family as we go out to do the work of Christmas."

May we be like the dancing child near me last Sunday, whose response to the anthems and the organ postlude was to sway and twirl, her whole body used in praise! May we be like the 97-year-old woman at the candlelight service on Christmas eve, who, though she "doesn't get out much anymore," became a child again, lost in the wonder of the moments of worship here in this cathedral. May we be like Cub Scout Zach Wilson who started, with his mother, the Central Florida Animal Food Pantry, after he realized that many of the cats and dogs he gave loving attention to at the animal shelter, were there because their owners couldn't afford to care for them any longer.

And may our truest selves be fitted for what theologian and poet Howard Thurman, called, "The work of Christmas"...

*When the star in the sky is gone,
When the Kings and Princes are home,
When the shepherds are back with their flocks,
The work of Christmas begins:
To find the lost
To heal the broken
To feed the hungry
To release the prisoner
To teach the nations
To bring Christ to all
To make music in the heart.*