

Christmas Eve + December 24, 2011

For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all (Titus 2:11)

When I was a kid, our church put on a Christmas Pageant each year. It was great fun and very exciting. If you were a kid at our church, sooner or later you would have a part to play in the annual pageant. One year I was a shepherd. That was easy. All I had to do was dress up like a shepherd, hold a crook and look adoringly at the Holy Family. Another year I was cast in the role of the angel Gabriel. Now, since in our imaginations angels come from above and speak from above, we had to figure out a way for me to hover over Mary as I gave her the announcement that she would give birth to Jesus. So, I got to do something that no other kid was allowed to do. I stood on top of a pew. That was great fun! The year that stands out in my memory is when I was cast as one of the Wise Men bringing gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. I remember putting a good deal of energy into that pageant. Children and parents and church school teachers were very busy preparing for the best pageant ever. Costumes were sewn together for each of us to wear. Props and scenery were created. Since gold, frankincense and myrrh were not readily available, we were each given an expensive looking, ornate gift to use instead. I was to bring in a fancy looking vase that was on loan from a member of the parish. We carefully practiced our part of processing while people were singing "We Three Kings" and bowing in reverence and kneeling before the Child to present our gifts.

Well, the day had arrived. We were well practiced and all ready. I remember standing in the Narthex just outside the worship space. I was both excited and nervous. Maybe that nervous energy or the butterflies in my stomach is what caused my fingers to suddenly turn to butter. Yes. Just minutes before the pageant began the expensive vase that I held in my hands slipped through my fingers and went tumbling to the concrete floor. In a matter of seconds, this beautiful vase was shattered into a thousand pieces. I was horrified. I was sad. Tears began to stream down my face. I began to cry like a baby. What had I done? For me, the pageant had been ruined. To top it off, I broke something really nice that belonged to someone else. Suddenly I had no prop to use for my role. I had no gift to bring.

There I stood sobbing and then I felt the hand of a caring adult on my shoulder and then another drying tears from my eyes. Next thing I knew, the pieces were swept up and someone found a replacement for the vase. I was told by several people that it was okay. There was reassurance all around and compassion in abundance. I was told that the vase could be replaced and I was show through others actions, that all would be well and people went out of their way to make sure that I was well. For me, the touch of that caring community was nothing less than the touch of God. God was fully present even though life did not go as planned. In the midst of accidents, hurt feelings, crushed spirits, and flowing tears, Christmas still happened. God was present. It didn't change the fact that I felt bummed and sad. Yet, even in the midst of those feelings and the reality that I had no gift to bring, the gift of God's love was present and my job was to receive it. Tonight we are on the receiving end of what God has given and what God continues to give.

One of the things I really like about the Christmas story as it is told in the Gospel of Luke is that takes place in the real world. A world filled with joy and sorrow. At the outset of the story, we learn of a census that is being taken that requires Joseph and Mary to go to his hometown. Luke lets us know that Jesus arrives in a world beset with political turmoil. There is no room in the Inn for the holy family. Christmas happens in a world of want and need and in a world where many do not have homes. The birth of the child takes place not in the city or in Jerusalem or in a castle, but in a feeding trough located in a barn. The good news of the birth is proclaimed to a band of shepherds. They were not the “important people” but those whose status was considered low. God is discovered in the most ordinary and humblest places and speaking and acting among those whom we least expect.

The fullness of God takes place in the world as it is, in the real world, in the working world, in the everyday world, in a most human and ordinary world, in an imperfect world, in a suffering world. God takes on human flesh and becomes one of us. We need not reach impossible heights to reach God. The good news is that God has come to us – just as we are. The fullness of God has arrived in Jesus who has come to live among the broken, the forgotten, the abandoned, the frightened, the sinner, the lost and the lonely. Luke tells us that the angels appeared to the shepherds at nighttime. They lit up the sky with the good news: “To you is born this day in the city of David, a Savior who is Christ the Lord.” It was as light shining in the darkness.

Are you experiencing unaltered joy tonight? To you is born a Savior. Are you sorrowful or sad? To you is born a Savior. Are you feeling a bit out of sorts? Have the holidays not gone as planned? To you is born a Savior. Maybe you are overwhelmed by the stresses and strains of life. Perhaps you are worn and weary, sick in body or spirit. To you is born a Savior. Chances are you might be experiencing broken relationships in your family or among your friends or among those with whom you work. To you is born a Savior. Are you finding it difficult to make ends meet or without work? To you is born a Savior. Are your dreams fulfilled or are your dreams shattered? Maybe you are not quite sure what your dreams are? The same good news is for all of you and whether you be “on top of the world” or feeling life’s crushing load or are somewhere in-between, know you are loved and the fullness of God is here among us. A savior is born to you and for you. You need not find or seek out God. God has come to you.

Once the shepherds hear the good news of Christ’s birth they run. They go with haste to see the Child and to behold the gift. They go to Bethlehem to see, first hand, this amazing gift that has been given. We, too, have come tonight to a place called Bethlehem. We’ve come to behold the gift, but not simply to behold the gift. We have come to receive the gift. Soon the table will be set, the prayer of thanks spoken to God and the gifts of Christ’s very own self wrapped in ordinary bread and wine will be given to us, to you and we will taste and see and know again the fullness of God who is here among us as light shining in the darkness. Amen.