



December 11, 2011

Sermon by Rev. Nancy Talbot

Snapshots from Luke's Christmas Album

Reading: Luke 1: 26-56

Several years ago now I was invited to attend a production of Broadway church's "Singing Christmas Tree." Although the evening was full of beautiful music, it was the dramatization of the Christmas story that I remember most clearly from that night. I particularly remember that moment when the shepherds were watching their flocks stage left, when suddenly, stage right, an angel floated down from the rafters of the church, great big fluffy white wings gently swaying behind her, and this cherubic face surrounded by golden ringlets framing her sweet little mouth that issued forth the most hauntingly beautiful Gloria in Excelesis Deo I have ever heard. And I thought to myself, Luke would be on the edge of his seat watching this treatment of his version of the Christmas story unfold (even if Mary and Joseph's costumes looked like they came from Holt Renfrew rather than Value Village which would have been more in keeping with the sentiment of the story)

Of the two narratives of Jesus birth that appear in the bible, Matthew's and Luke's, there is no question that when it comes to putting on a really big show, Luke trumps Matthew every time. Luke's version of Jesus' birth begins with the story of Zechariah and Elizabeth that we heard the first Sunday of advent, a mature couple who have long given up hope of becoming parents until suddenly an angel arrives on the scene and says they are to bear a child. A frightened and doubtful Zechariah is stricken with silence.

Meanwhile strange things are happening over at Mary's house. She too has been visited by a heavenly creature telling her she is also going to bear a child, but how can this be she asks, for I am still a virgin? Do not be afraid Mary says the angel, with God all things are possible.

So Mary consents, months later she flees to her cousin Elizabeth's house and when she sees her the baby in Elizabeth's womb leaps with joy at the mere proximity of the child growing in Mary's womb. Mary, a mere child herself, in return spews forth one of the most beautifully articulated theological statements in Christian history,(stage notes: preferably sung) also known as the Magnificat.

Then Elizabeth has her baby, Zechariah finds his voice and when he does, like Mary, he speaks forth an amazing prophecy, we call it the song of Zechariah.

And then comes the decree,(lights soften, orchestra begins to play). All must go to their own towns to be registered. And we who have heard the story over and over again we immediately begin to imagine, what is only in our imaginations, because it's not actually in the bible, Mary and Joseph travelling all the way from Nazareth to Bethlehem on a lowly donkey. How tired they must have been when they arrived in the city of David. And then, what, don't tell me, there's no room? What will our hero and heroine do? Where will the child be born? Enter, stage left, the innkeeper. Here he is to save the day! The baby will be born in a stable, surrounded by sweet smelling hay and the warm comfort of the animals who welcome the newborn King. Except of course if you've ever been in a stable and then you know how smelly and noisy they really are.

But no time to linger over insignificant details, there's shepherds to be woken and an angel choir to sing and haste to be made to see this thing which God has made known. And there's Mary to treasure all these things into her heart....curtain...end of Act One.

Yes, Luke really knows how to tell a great story. And part of being a good storyteller is drawing us in to the action. And Luke does draw us in doesn't he? He draws us in because he paints a picture of God that is so accessible, we can reach into the manger and hold onto the holy for ourselves and draw to ourselves the new life waiting to be held. We can see ourselves in the frightened young couple star struck at the birth of their first child; and in the mangy shepherds longing for Good News, longing to be set free; and in old Zechariah too beaten down by life to dare to hope for his dream to come true. Maybe we can even see ourselves in the angels who are so certain about what they believe they can't stop themselves from singing. Luke's gospel is the gospel for the people and that is why it resonates with us so deeply, sometimes in ways we aren't even aware of.

The context of Luke's gospel is very similar to the context of Matthew's gospel. They were both written during the first century and they both reflect the social-political environment into which Jesus was born into. This was the time when the Roman Empire reigned supreme and when Israel was under the thumb of the Roman Emperor. Both Gospels present Jesus as an alternate `ruler` to the rulers of the empire. And so when Mary sings the Magnificat which we heard read this morning. When she speaks of the lowly being lifted up and the hungry being filled, and the powerful being brought down from their thrones, what's being referred to by the writer of Luke is the way that Jesus empowered and led his people in standing up to the powers that be by loving them and reminding them of the power of the divine within each one of them.

The most significant difference between Matthew and Luke is that Matthew writes for a Jewish Christian audience and Luke rights for a more universal audience which is also probably why we relate more easily to what Luke has to say.

But beyond the way that Luke, like Matthew, addresses the political implications of the story of Jesus birth, the writer of Luke's gospel also has a remarkable gift for holding up the truth about our lives, specifically our spiritual lives.

One of the recurring themes in Luke's gospel is the theme of joy. He pays particularly close attention to the interplay of joy and fear in our lives. In the story of Jesus birth whenever anyone is confronted with the news that God is about to do a new and extraordinary thing a familiar pattern is repeated. When Zechariah is interrupted with news of Elizabeth's impending pregnancy his first reaction is fear; when Mary is surprised by the Angel Gabriel announcing that she too is to bear a son her first reaction is fear; when the Shepherds are startled by the angels singing Gloria on the hillside their first reaction is fear. And each time the fear is expressed, the angels quickly reassure them: Zechariah ``Fear Not;`` Mary `Fear Not`` Shepherds ``Do not be afraid.

There's a saying that whenever you hear those words `Do Not Be Afraid` one thing is certain. God is near. The two seem to go hand in hand and that's especially true whenever we're dealing with the fragility of new life.

Bringing to birth new life, bringing to birth a miracle is a scary thing. It takes courage. It takes courage whether the life we are birthing is an actual child, or whether we are birthing our own more authentic selves, or a new self after an illness or addiction or a loss. It takes courage if the miracle we are waiting on and labouring for is a transformation in our beloved institutions or places of work; or on the streets of the downtown eastside; or at the borderlines between Palestine and Israel.

To be asked to bring life to birth is to be thrust into the land of uncertainty it is to lose control of the present in order to embrace a brighter future. It pushes us to the edge of our capabilities and the edge of our knowing and calls us to let go, to trust in something larger than ourselves.

Being asked to do something or become someone that we would otherwise never thought we were capable of becoming or doing is frightening. The writer of Luke's gospel gets that.

But he also knows that surrendering to our fear and handing over our trust is the place where the doorway to joy begins to open up. It opens when we know that what we are participating in and what we're receiving is not of our own making. It comes when we know it is a gift we are being given, a gift of light in the darkness, hope in the midst of despair, a more abundant way of living, a greater and more beautiful and more peace-filled world being ushered into being than we ever thought possible. And we know we couldn't make it all happen on our own. That's when joy suddenly rushes in. The writer of Luke's gospel gets that.

Dominic Crossan and Marcus Borg say that the birth narratives found in both Luke and Matthew's gospels are meant to function as an overture or a foreshadowing to the complete story of Jesus that gets told in their gospels.

So in the same way when we go to the theatre and hear the orchestra strike up the overture to West Side Story and it introduces us to what we know is coming; conflict between two rival gangs, a love story, loss of life and in the end a truce and love that prevails;

When the lights are dimmed and the angel makes his entrance, we know that what's to follow is a humble birth, a compelling human presence, conflict, death and in the end, love that always overcomes. Luke knows how to put on a really good show and the best part we're written into the script.