

Fourth Advent, December 20, 2020

I want and need to give credit to the Rev. Herb O'Driscoll, Anglican priest, former Dean of Christ Church Cathedral in Vancouver, author, and marvelous storyteller--someone from whom I took a preaching course years ago. Although I have made some of his work mine in many ways, certain ideas, images and evocative language remain his. . .and always will be his. And quite frankly, why shouldn't others be touched and moved by something engaging created by someone else and then "borrowed" by me to share with you and so enrich your journey of faith? So, God bless Herbert O'Driscoll and God bless you.

60 years before the first story was ever written about the Saviour of the world,
a girl carrying a water-pot in one hand while supporting another on her head
picked her way down a hillside path.

She walked slowly, enjoying the view
of the lush and fertile valley of Esdraelon lying at the foot of the hill.

As she entered the cave which sheltered the village well,
she lost her vision momentarily as her eyes
adjusted from the blazing sunlight
to the shadowed cool depths of the spring.

It was something that had happened to her a thousand times before,
but this time she felt, somehow, different. . .

almost frightened and she wanted to flee.

It wasn't really anything she saw or heard or touched.

It was rather something she felt—a presence of some kind.

You know, we speak so casually of the presence of God
as if it were always nice and soothing,
and, of course, there are times when it is.

But to describe God's presence only in such a way
is like describing the ocean as always calm
or the wind as always a whisper or the fire as always comforting.

There is a terror to God's presence, too—a terror that comes
with the sense of God's majesty and glory. . .of God's total "otherness".

And, like this young maiden,

if you have ever sensed that side of God's being,
you can understand her reaction of wanting to run.

But she couldn't.

Oh, she felt fear and willed her legs to move, but they didn't. . .
 and they didn't because she also felt
 an indescribable gentleness and peace--
 a peace she never wanted to leave or lose;
 a peace that comes with the feeling
 of being singled out as special or blessed.

Then, just as suddenly as it came, it was gone. . .
 and in its place was heard once more the silence of the cave,
 a silence broken only by the trickling noise of the spring
 as it bubbled and burred its way across the stones.
 Everything was the same as it had been before. . .
 and yet nothing was the same. . .and nothing would ever be the same again.

You see, although she did not know precisely
 what had happened to her or around her or inside her,
 she knew that her world had been changed, entered,
 penetrated by a force and a reality
 that was far greater and deeper and more powerful
 than anything she had ever known or felt before.

She couldn't recall hearing a voice, and yet knew that she had been spoken to;
 she couldn't recall her reply and yet knew she had said "Yes."
 Just a simple answer, "Yes."
 But what this young teenage girl would find out later
 is what many of us have found out for ourselves—
 that when you say "Yes" to God, nothing is ever quite the same again.

Not too long afterward, she faced Joseph on the hillside
 and saw the shock and disbelief in his eyes.
 Now, Joseph was more understanding than most men,
 and yet everything in his upbringing—his notion of manhood,
 his understanding of their roles in their society—
 everything rebelled against what he was hearing. . .
 that a child, an unexpected and unknown child, was to be born to her.

He knew there would be pain for both of them
 when the neighbours began their whispering campaign;

he knew the consequences that would surely result
if he broke off their engagement
and she was left alone, unmarried, and pregnant.

But those consequences and that anticipated pain
were not the only thoughts that rushed through his mind.
Was his beloved in the hold of some terrible madness?
Had she lost her grip on reality?
Was she making up this fantastic story
out of shame at being pregnant by someone else?

In disappointment and confusion they parted—
the agony of a decision unresolved.
Only later would she find out about the sleep, the dream,
that had changed his mind for him and made the decision clear.

To be sure, the future was still dark and forbidding,
filled with fearful possibilities,
but at least they both had the assurance
of God's presence with them to sustain them.

Meanwhile, in the warm waters of her womb, the child/king lay at peace,
ceaselessly moving and rocking. . .and yet perfectly at rest.
He occupied a universe within her
of which he was the only inhabitant;
a kingdom over which he was the only ruler.

And there is a lesson in that for us, I think.
For you see, God and humanity are mingled,
not only in that long-ago womb,
but in the lives and hearts of each one of us.
That mystery of "Emmanuel"—of "God with us"—
means that God is within all of us, even if we are not always aware
of just how miraculous that presence is.

Or look at the same mystery in this way:
One day, the child would nurse at her breasts
and grow strong on her love, but for now,
unformed and yet forming, shapeless and yet taking shape,
for now he fed and grew on her life.

And that is true of us, too—that mystery of God within us:
 For God who knows no need and needs no one—
 God has nevertheless allowed our poor natures
 to bring the divine love and presence to birth in our world.
 And, for that reason, we, too, are called “blessed”. . .
 and, having been blessed, we are called to be a blessing to others.

Some months later, carried in the silent universe of her womb,
 he would descend from the hills of Galilee,
 pass through the upper valley of Jordan south to Judea—
 and men and women would pass the King of all
 without knowing or seeing or caring.

And it was not only then, either, for in every age, including our own,
 God chooses to go forever hidden through time and space—
 hidden in these words of mine,
 hidden in the holy sacraments,
 hidden within your hearts—seen and recognized and praised
 only by those with the eyes of faith.

I suppose that if God had chosen to incarnate Jesus
 in our extremely clever, high-tech age,
 we would have seen him on a Sonar Scan or Ultrasound.
 We would have seen his tiny leg upraised,
 his arm swinging to and fro, his head falling and rising,
 seen him sucking his thumb. . .
 and faith would no longer have been necessary.

And yet, I think, even if we had been able to see him,
 we probably still would not confess him as Saviour
 any more than we do now—
 for although we may have seen him as a child,
 we would certainly have missed seeing him
 as the King of Kings and Lord of Lords—

because only faith can see the glory of God
 in the commonness of bread and wine and water;
 only faith can confess the presence of God
 in people like you and me. . .and faith, then or now,
 faith always seems to be in short supply.

As does money. Yes, money!

After all, to keep the machinery of an empire running is expensive. . .
and Rome was no exception.

To keep the creaking cogs of administration moving
demands money. . .lots of money—and money is obtained from taxes
and collecting taxes requires a census-taking—
a numbering of the tax-paying citizens of the realm.

So, very likely, the diplomatic pouch containing the census-order from Rome
passed within five kilometres of a tiny village called Nazareth
in which a future king grew to life in a young girl's womb.

How odd, we say. How remarkable or ironic.

But, not really. . .not when you think about it.

I mean, lots of things happen in our world—
in business or in the military, in boardrooms or banking offices—
things which have a profound impact on our lives. . .
decisions that affect us dramatically
whether we like their effect or not.

And by those decisions, made by someone else,
we are forced into actions or responses
that change the course of our lives.

That's how it is now. . .and that's how it was then.

Here she is near the end of her pregnancy, counting down the last weeks,
gathering a little store of necessary things
and arranging for the help of friends during the delivery—
when, all of a sudden, those plans are completely changed.
The fact that Joseph has family roots in Judea
makes it absolutely necessary that they go south before the census deadline.

Now, between Nazareth and Bethlehem
snakes a 100 kilometre long and dangerous road—
dangerous especially for a pregnant woman and an unborn child.
But, go they must—and all they can do is hope
that this new turn of events is for a purpose. . .
that it has some meaning and reason.

And so they leave, uncertain, unsure, but trusting.

Now, unknown to Mary and Joseph,
 other travelers have also set out on an even longer journey—
 one that has started on the high plateaus of Persia,
 and one that will end months and months later
 with men of wisdom kneeling in a far-away house.

Also unknown to Mary and Joseph,
 the sky above them has been moving and wheeling
 into rare combinations of planets and stars
 in order to pass on a message from God to philosophers and kings—
 a message of a ruler who is to be born
 for a purpose long-promised and a reason long-awaited.

The young couple, of course, knows nothing of these things.
 And often neither do we know how other journeys will converge on ours,
 how other lives will touch ours,
 how other joys and sorrows will meet and share ours.
 And yet, like the Magi and this couple,
 we, too, are called to travel into the unknown,
 trusting that all will be well—
 trusting that the One who calls us to go,
 trusting the One who promises to be there waiting for us—
 waiting to welcome us home at the end of our journey.

So, like Mary and Joseph,
 like the three kings and the saints of ages past,
 like Jesus, the child now grown up to manhood
 and carrying the sins of the world on his back—
 like all of them, let us go, too, in peace and in good faith
 in the name and in the company of our Lord.

Amen. SDG