

Dec. 2, 2018

First Sunday of Advent

Luke 1: 47-55

Prayer: Dear Lord, as we enter the season of Advent, let us embrace the waiting that doesn't come easily to us. We pray in the name of Jesus, the name you wore when you came to live among us. Amen.

My Pocket ... a Manger

I had the launch party for my third mystery novel, *Death of a Jester*, this week. You may have seen pictures online of Kreg and Jonathan helpfully wearing medieval jester caps.

At the center of the story is a community theater that is mounting that old war horse, *Annie Get Your Gun*.

Well, if you know anything about *Annie Get Your Gun*, it's set in Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show. And its opening song, its signature song, is "There's No Business Like Show Business."

On with the show. The show must go on.

So even when costumes are stolen and used in a kidnapping, even when the leading man has his jaw broken, even when someone is murdered in the theater, it's on with the show.

Like *Annie Get Your Gun*, every musical has an overture. That's the orchestral arrangement that introduces the show. It's often a medley of the music that will appear later.

In other words, it's an encapsulation, a musical summary of what is to come. In *Annie Get Your Gun*, a good deal of the overture is "There's No Business Like Show Business."

Two of our foremost modern Bible scholars call our Advent and Christmas stories the "overtures" of their gospels. Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan write that the shepherds

and the stable and the poor family are the overture, the introduction, to the adult Jesus who will live in Luke's gospel.

The star and the visiting magi and the flight to Egypt are the overture, the introduction, to the adult Jesus who will live in Matthew's gospel.

So these beloved Advent and Christmas stories are not just add-ons to the gospel that Mark wrote first. They are deeply entrenched theologies, "overtures" of the adult Jesus who will appear in the gospels of Luke and Matthew.

As we well know, there are people who celebrate this season without Jesus. Heaven knows, there's enough to fill it up – Santa Claus, the North Pole, the elves, the toy workshop, Mrs. Santa, Elf on the Shelf, the Grinch, the Who's, Ralphie. Even if the *baby Jesus* sneaks into the celebration, certainly the adult Jesus dares not intrude.

I personally am baffled by people who come to church only at Christmas and Easter. They agree to hear about Christ's birth and death but nothing in between. Would the birth and death *matter* if there was nothing in between?

But perhaps that is precisely the point. They are willing to nod to the baby Jesus, celebrated at Macy's and Belk's and ice rinks and Christmas parades.

They are willing to nod to the resurrected Jesus, celebrated among the Easter bunnies and Easter lilies and spring flowers and new clothes.

But all that other stuff about loving your enemy and caring for the poor and forgiving seventy times seven -- not so much.

What they may not realize is there's an adult Jesus lurking in our Advent stories.

While all four gospel writers tell the story of Jesus's crucifixion and resurrection, not all four thought his birth was important. John and Mark skipped it entirely. Only Matthew and Luke give us any information about the birth.

What we have to remember is that no historians, certainly no gospel writers, were noticing when these events took place. It was much later -- after the resurrection, after it became clear that Jesus wasn't going to return immediately -- that Luke and Matthew wrote their stories down.

Like Borg and Crossan, Father Raymond Brown is a Catholic theologian who has done much study on the infancy narratives. Rather than describing them as musical overtures, he describes them as gospels in miniature.

Matthew was fascinated by the notion of Jesus as fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy. So he wrote the birth story of a star from the East that drew Gentile magi to worship the newborn baby.

Luke was fascinated by the notion of Jesus as a savior of the broken and poor and marginalized. So he wrote the birth story of a baby coming to shepherds who were out keeping their dirty sheep in a field. He wrote the birth story of a baby laid in a stable manger.

In that way, the adult Jesus is present in these stories. What he would teach, who he would be, what his life would mean are *introduced* in these infancy narratives.

And so this morning, it won't be so surprising when we bounce from announcements of his impending birth ... to communion, the remembrance of his death. It is all of a package. The same Jesus who died on the cross ... was lurking in the stable.

Luke tells us that the angel Gabriel visited the young woman Mary to tell her about the coming of this Lord. And after he told her, she burst into what we call Mary's song or the Magnificat. If you'd like to read along, we are reading from **Luke 1: 47-55**. This is Mary speaking:

⁴⁷ my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, ⁴⁸for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.

Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; ⁴⁹for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. ⁵⁰His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. ⁵¹He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

⁵²He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; ⁵³he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.

⁵⁴He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, ⁵⁵according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever."

Luke's entire gospel will tell about Jesus eating with tax collectors, healing lepers, welcoming women as followers, allowing prostitutes to touch him. And here, here, before he's

even born is his mother singing about scattering the proud and lifting up the lowly, about bringing down the powerful and filling the hungry.

Here at the very beginning, we see the story in miniature. The story of a baby who, in a few weeks, will be laid in a manger, a feeding trough for animals. With shepherds as witnesses.

Do you see what Luke is doing? The adult Jesus isn't very far from this stable in Bethlehem.

The baby Jesus will be born in a manger because the adult Jesus came to save unclean shepherds and dishonest tax collectors and hurting prostitutes and abused women.

We once had a Triune member named Karen Lucci, who was probably the most artistic person I've ever met. She founded our art room. She painted the gorgeous mural in our dining room. She published several books of illustrated poetry.

One year, at our Christmas Eve service, two little girls stood near the back giving out gifts as people left. One gave out sugar cookies. Her little sister gave out tiny plastic baby Jesuses wrapped in tissue paper.

Karen, ever watchful, wrote a poem about it. The poem is told from the perspective of one of our homeless men, headed back to sleep under a bridge on Christmas Eve:

It is called **The Gift:**

*the last carol was sung
final lights flicked off
candles snuffed out
while we were courteously ushered out
a little girl stood at the door
distributing lumpy sugar cookies
with too many sprinkles
for my taste
another little girl*

*all spit and polish and curls
stood by
handing out little wads
of tissue paper wrapped up
with scotch tape
and said she'd made baby Jesus
had a basket full
and I wondered if her name was Mary
so I ate the cookie and shoved the wad
in my pocket and moved out with the rest*

*most moved off briskly I imagined
to the Waffle House or Denny's
or a warm home with a lighted tree
but I lingered a bit reminiscing
remembering the scent of candles
and pine and gingerbread*

*returning to my place
sad and angry and disappointed again
but just what was it I wanted
what did I expect
the Christ of Christmas
for Christ's sake?
a box wrapped with colored paper and sparkly ribbons
a wrapped gift filled with possibilities
not tube socks or a hygiene hit
with a generic tag marked "male"*

*God
I wanted a shiny gift
a gift picked out just for me
a tag with my own name written on it*

*and I crawled into my bag
and curled up under my blankets
and an old Persian rug
and put my hands in my pockets to keep 'em warm
and that's where I found Jesus
a little linty and mixed with Tootsie Pop wrappers*

*I flicked off the crumbs and took notice
who would have thought
My pocket a manger*

In the language of metaphors, I haven't come across one more beautiful than this one.

My pocket ... a manger.

A feeding trough in the backwater of the Roman Empire. A lint-and-crumb-filled pocket of a homeless man in Greenville.

This is the savior we worship, one who came to live in the mud and the muck and the blood and the lint and the crumbs. One who understands our pain and our sadness because he took part in it.

One year, one of our men asked if he could consider our tree his Christmas tree because he'd never had one before. We said, *My goodness, yes, that's exactly what it's for.* All the decorations in this sanctuary and in the dining hall next door *are* the decorations for those who might not have their own home this year. *That's exactly what they're for so please consider them yours.*

As we were decorating tis week, Cheri pulled out so many beautiful ornaments for the dining hall, I asked her, "Did I see all this on your expense account?" She said she gave the receipts to Pat and they hid them from me. I told her that was an excellent plan.

Our mission at Triune is to champion all parishioners, all people, no matter how destitute, as image bearers of a holy God. The gospel of Luke couldn't be more appropriate if we'd hired an ad agency to write it.

A poor baby born in a stable, laid in a manger. A wandering savior who warned potential disciples that he had no place to lay his head. That will be our Advent story as it is every Advent.

But we can't stop there. If we are to honor the infancy narratives as overtures, as gospels in miniature, we must make room for the adult Jesus they point to.

The adult who demanded justice and mercy and forgiveness.

The adult who commanded honor of God and love of neighbor.

The adult whose broken body and shed blood we will remember during communion.

How do we accommodate *that* Jesus into our lives?

I love the imagery of Christ in a manger, Christ in a homeless man's pocket as much as anyone.

But the Christ we serve is no baby. He is a God who requires discipleship.

During the season of Advent. During every season.

Amen.