

Opening Prayer: As we have heard your word in the scriptures – so now take our hearts and minds and bodies that it’s meaning may work results in our lives. In Christ’s name we pray. Amen.

Having a Willing Heart

Luke 1:26-38, 46b-55

December 21, 2008

There’s a story told about a wandering scholar back in the middle ages who got deathly sick one day. The scholar was very poor and so he was taken to a hospital for orphans and transients. Assuming that because he was poor he would not know their learned Latin language the doctors began to discuss the possibility of using him for some medical experiments. They rationalized – out loud – that since he was a worthless wanderer the results wouldn’t matter. At this comment the wandering scholar opened his eyes as he looked up at the doctors and said in their learned Latin tongue, “Please do not call anyone worthless for whom Christ has died.”

If there’s a message in the fact that Jesus, the Christ, was born in a manger, in an obscure village like Bethlehem, to an unknown peasant teenager, it is precisely that his coming was for everyone – that human worth is not measured by wealth, position or power; but only by the fact that every one of us is a child of God. All of life is sacred – all of life is useable by God – the lowliest, the littlest, the least is exalted – lifted up – is significant in God’s eyes.

If you hear nothing else this morning, hear this: there’s not a one of us who is unimportant to God. No matter what we’ve done in our lives up to this point – no matter how much we have earned – no matter the style of our clothes – we all matter to God. That’s the message of Christmas, at least according to the author of Luke.

Luke’s Gospel has been called by many Bible scholars “The Gospel of the underdog.” There’s just a sensitivity in the book for the least, the lost and the poor – those often overlooked by the rest of society. It is in Luke that we learn the story about the Samaritan who stopped and helped a stranger after a busy priest and pious Levite passed by the man on the other side of the street. It is in Luke that the cleansed Samaritan leper returned to thank Jesus while the others continued on their way. It is in Luke that we read about the rich man and Lazarus, the poor man. In Matthew we read, “Blessed are the poor in spirit,” but, in Luke we read, “Blessed are you poor, for yours is the Kingdom of God.”

In Luke Jesus is the friend of outcasts and sinners. Only in Luke do we read the parable about the self-righteous Pharisee and despised tax gatherer. Only in Luke do we read the story about Jesus’ friendship with Zacchaeus, a tax collector. Only Luke records the story about the dying thief being granted entrance into paradise. Only Luke records the story of the son who disgraced himself but who found a father waiting for him when he returned.

In Luke’s day Jewish males thanked God that they were not born “a Gentile, a slave or a woman.” Luke gave every one of them a special place in his Gospel. Luke had Jesus describe his ministry by quoting from the prophet Isaiah: “The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord.” (Luke 4:18-19)

And thus it is in Luke that we read of Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist, and we read of the prophetess Anna. It is in Luke that we read about the widow of Nain and of the woman who anointed Jesus’ feet in the house of Simon the Pharisee. It is the author of Luke who makes vivid the picture of Mary and Martha and

Mary Magdalene. It is in Luke that we read about Jesus speaking to a group of women on his way to Calvary – a group of women standing on the side of the road weeping.

So, we shouldn't be surprised that the author chose to write about the birth from a woman's point of view – from the point of view of Mary, the one entrusted with the labor which would allow the incarnation to become a reality. And, we should not be surprised that he has her declaring with her voice: “God has put down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of low degree; God has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent empty away.” (Luke 1:52-53)

The author of Luke wrote about the coming of the Savior into the world through the point of view of the mother – Mary – because she represents so much that is significant about the way God is at work in this world doing new things. The author of Luke wrote about this historically, theologically significant event from the point of view of Mary because she represents the powerlessness of the young – because she represents humility – because she represents lowliness – because she represents insignificance – because she was not royalty – because she was not well-educated – because she was poor – because she represents everything other than what the insiders in the faith would expect concerning the promised one of God – because she represents the weak in our world.

Mary was a plain, young, peasant girl. Some Bible scholars have suggested she may have been as young as 14. She was an unwed, pregnant teenager. And yet – and yet – she was entrusted with this great honor: to allow the Savior of the world to be nurtured within her.

Although the text doesn't mention it, racing through her mind had to be thoughts about the problems her being pregnant was going to present her. Despite her youthfulness, she had been around long enough to have observed what people said about young girls – about any woman caught in her condition for that matter. She had to have seen the self-respect and community respect of women in her situation crumble under the weight of the snide remarks and leering looks. She had to have been thinking about how her small community of Nazareth prided itself on being a religious community and their tendency to know everybody's business, especially the spicy, questionable stuff like her pregnancy was going to be.

But, what had to have concerned her even more than the gossip that was going to go on about her was what her betrothed, Joseph, would say or even possibly do. According to Jewish law, an unwed pregnant woman could be put to death for being pregnant and unwed. Mary probably thought she could handle the leering looks and suggestive comments that the rough camel drivers and soldiers would send her way – but what if her beloved Joseph scorned her? Would he listen to the whispers – the rumors – the talk of her being a cheap tramp? Would he believe her tale about the mysterious messenger from God? Or, would he reject her story as simply an attempt to cover up her promiscuity? Would he call off the marriage?

Mary had to have been tempted to bury her head in her hands and cry when she heard God's idea for her life. She had to have been tempted to reject the role suggested for her. She had to have been tempted not to hurt the kind and devout carpenter with whom she planned to share the rest of her life.

There's no question Mary was in a delicate position. Public scandal, physical danger, personal disgrace were all real possibilities if she accepted this perceived gift from God. There's no question no one would have blamed her if she had said, “You've got to be kidding! No way am I going to be a party to this far out proposed venture. I can't risk what might happen if I agree to do what you propose.”

But, that's not what she said. Instead, she said: "Here I am, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." It was a willing heart she offered. She said, "Yes." She chose to accept the risks because she believed that God could do what was humanly impossible. Mary listened and responded – knowing full well she was unworthy of the honor, knowing her inadequacies, knowing the problems it would create for her – because she trusted God could do far more with her willing spirit than she could ever hope.

Charles Schultz, in one of his *Peanuts* cartoons, has Lucy and Marsha walking to school. Lucy comments, "I'm going to ask the teacher if I can be Mary in the Christmas play this year."

Marsha answers, "She's already asked me, sir."

Lucy continues, "I think I'll be great in the part."

Marsha says, "She asked me yesterday, sir."

Still ignoring her, Lucy declares, "I like the part where the Angel Gabriel talks to me."

With exasperation, Marsha says, "Why would Gabriel talk to you? You never listen!"

Listening is the first step to being able to be used by God – to having a willing heart. Mary listened and thus was in a position to respond.

As far as Mary's neighbors and the religious and political leaders of the day were concerned, Mary certainly shouldn't have been in a position to have such a major role in history. But, you see, God needs to make a point – and that point is that everyone is important in God's kingdom. We are chosen not because of who we are but because of how God can use us – because of our willingness to let God work in and through us – because of our willing hearts. God can transform the world through the lowly, the different, the insignificant, when we are willing to say "yes" to the invitation to let God work through us.

The story of Mary is one example of how God's power can change human lives. Mary was called blessed, not because of any quality of her personality, or any material success she achieved, or any status or influence in society, but simply because she was a person of faith. Mary was a woman who trusted in the power of God.

It was a new day for the world when Jesus was born. He brought with him a whole new set of values. A manger exalted over a mansion – peace is exalted over power – and persons seen as persons, no matter how small, no matter how big, no matter what color the skin, no matter the amount of hair on the head, or what street in the city they lay their tired heads, no matter.

The gift we have to offer God is not our social position in this world nor the possessions we have accumulated, but rather, it is ourselves – complete with warts – handicaps – personality quirks – whatever our weirdness or uniqueness. God can use us with whatever we have to offer if we say "yes."

There's a story about a magnificent church on a hill in a great city. When lighted up for a special festival, it could be seen for miles around. And yet, there was something even more remarkable than its beauty – and that

was the strange and wonderful legend of the bells. Some of you have probably heard it – it's one of those stories that keep coming around.

It seems these bells had not been heard for a number of years. Not even on Christmas. The custom was that on Christmas Eve all the people brought their offerings to the Christ-child. And the legend claimed – some times in the past when very unusual offerings were laid upon it - the chimes rang out their glorious music. Lately, no offering had been great enough for such to happen.

Now, a few miles from the city, in a small village lived a boy named Pedro and his little brother. They didn't know too much about the chimes, but they'd heard of the beauty of the Christmas Eve service and wanted desperately to go.

Finally there came a year when it looked like it was going to be possible. Snow covered the ground and it was bitterly cold. They walked most of the afternoon and made the edge of the city by nightfall. They were just about to enter the great gates of the city when they discovered a poor woman too sick and tired to get in where she might find shelter. After trying to get her to move on for quite a while, Pedro turned to his brother and said, "It's no use, little brother. I will stay with her. You will have to go on alone." The youngster protested, but Pedro insisted and gave him a silver piece to place upon the altar when no one was looking. They both blinked back tears as the little brother hustled off to experience everything twice.

The church was a brilliant place that night. The walls shook when the organ played and the people sang. The service ended with everyone processing to the altar and laying their offerings upon it. Some brought beautiful jewels – some heavy baskets of gold. A famous writer laid down a book which he had been writing for years. Even the king of the country, hoping with all the rest to win for himself the chime of the Christmas bells laid on the altar the royal crown covered with precious stones. But, no sound was heard.

And then, as the choir began to sing the closing hymn – the organist suddenly stopped playing. Could it be? Yes, high up in the bell choir – ever so softly came the sound of the bells. As everyone stood to look at the altar to get a view of the great gift that had awakened the bells – all they saw was the small figure of little brother and a silver piece on the altar.

The message of Christmas – no matter how big, no matter how small – no matter how famous – no matter how young or how old – God can use what and who we are. Willing hearts is the necessary thing. Mary, Bethlehem, a baby, a manger, you and me: God can use us. All it takes is our willingness to be used – our statement of faith – our "yes." Let us pray.

O God of us all and all that we are or aren't, we pause at the close of this service mindful of your great gift. We marvel at the thought that you can use us like you used Bethlehem and Elizabeth and Mary and Joseph and an infant – we even hesitate in disbelief because we cannot find too much good in ourselves for you to use. Help us in these moments to believe you accept even us and help us to accept the invitation to be used by you.

And now, as we move toward the close of the Advent season and the focal point of all our preparation may our spirits be lifted up – may hope, peace, joy, and love again fill our every pore – may the wonder of Christ's birth bring healing to each and everyone of us. For it's in his name we pray. Amen.