

## Hearing Voices

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

December 14, 2008

Her name was Marcie. Everyone in the family knew she didn't like to receive Christmas presents. She was known to go to her room and stay there whenever the family gathered around the Christmas tree to open the presents.

Santa brought Marcie a doll buggy and a doll one year. The doll said, "I love you," whenever someone squeezed it. It was really a neat baby doll but Marcie wouldn't have anything to do with it. She wouldn't even pick it up. She left it lying on the floor under the tree and went to her room.

The family was getting pretty tired of her attitude toward presents. And so, finally, on Christmas Day after dinner, Marcie's grandmother took her aside to try and have a little heart to heart talk. "Marcie," she said, "come here and sit on my lap." Marcie's grandmother had one of those grandmother laps that was big and comfortable. Marcie jumped up onto her grandmother's lap and her grandmother asked, "Now, Marcie, tell me why you don't like to get presents."

At first Marcie didn't say anything. She just sort of snuggled closer to her grandmother until she was really warm and cozy. Then she said, "Because I'm not good enough."

Marcie's grandmother was shocked. "What ever made you think a thing like that?" she asked.

And Marcie said, "Well, people are always telling me to be good so that Santa Claus will come. And you know Grandma, as hard as I try, I can't always be good. So I don't deserve any presents."

Marcie's grandmother smiled and hugged her even closer. And then she told Marcie something that Marcie would never forget. "Marcie, people don't give you presents because you've been good. They give you presents because they love you. We all love you, Marcie, and we would give you presents no matter how good or bad you might have been."

A smile came across Marcie's face as well. She gave her grandmother a big kiss as she jumped down from her lap. And then she headed for the Christmas tree, picked up her baby doll and squeezed it – and out came the baby doll's recorded message: "I love you."<sup>1</sup>

Her name was Nicole. She wasn't an easy child to love. Her Sunday School teacher's name was Mary. Mary was one of those very dedicated persons who was as busy as everyone else but who still agreed to direct the Christmas play when asked. It wasn't an easy task since many of the children were especially difficult. None quite so as Nicole.

Mary said that she often prayed that God would bless Nicole but that she had to admit that she wished she wasn't in her Sunday School class. "Nicole had stringy hair, dirty fingernails, and a runny nose." She sort of hung around on the fringes of the class. And she had this stomping kind of walk. Sitting still wasn't one of her strong suits either. And, it seemed as if she always had to have the last word.

It was early in Advent when Mary stood before the children during their first practice for the Christmas program. She was holding the typed pages of the nativity script they were going to use. She invited those who wished to have a speaking part to hold up a hand. Everyone except Nicole did.

Mary was surprised. She asked, “Nicole, wouldn’t you like to be in the program?”

Nicole’s response was: “Who said I was coming to your program? I’m probably going to a party that night.” She was sitting alone – like usual - a few rows behind the others. Her arms were folded across her chest and she was leaning back rather precariously on the legs of her chair.

Mary prayed silently, “Lord, please help me love Nicole.” And then she said to Nicole, “Well, I do have a few more parts if you change your mind.”

“I won’t,” Nicole retorted stubbornly.

During dress rehearsal the children sat in the front pews while parents rushed around putting final touches on the bath-towel headdresses of the shepherds and the tinsel halos of the angels.

Finally Mary called out from the back of the sanctuary, “OK, take your places.” And the first reader began: “In those days a decree went out...”

Behind her Mary heard, “Mary doesn’t act like she’s gonna have a baby.” Nicole may not have wanted to be in the program but she sure made her presence known at the rehearsal.

Mary put a finger to her mouth while reaching back with her other hand to pat Nicole’s hand. Nicole pushed Mary’s hand away as she responded, “OK! OK!”

When it was time for the last scene, only a single spotlight shone on the holy family. The children were humming “Silent Night” when some movement in front of the manger destroyed the beauty of the scene.

Mary called out, “Nicole, what are you doing there?”

Nicole responded with, “I’m just looking. Besides, it’s not a real baby. It’s just a doll. I touched it.”

Again Mary prayed, “Lord, please help me love Nicole.”

“OK, that’s it,” she announced. “Everyone be sure to be here at six-thirty tonight so you’ll be ready to start promptly at seven.”

By 6:45 that night the air was alive backstage in anticipation of what was ahead. One minute before seven Mrs. Wright entered the church with her tiny new baby. The plan was for her baby to replace the doll used during rehearsals. She said to Mary as she placed her baby in the manger, “He’s just been fed. So he should sleep during the program.”

The organ began to play and Mary took her place in the front pew in preparation for her role of prompting. As the narration began Mary felt something bump her knee accompanied with a little shove. “Move over. I decided not to go to the party after all,” Nicole muttered.

Mary didn’t take her eyes off the drama as she moved over and reached out to pat Nicole’s knee. It was of course flung back into her own lap. Mary thought to herself, “I’m trying, Lord.”

The angels sang – the shepherds went to Bethlehem – the wise men went to see Herod and then to the stable. Mary sat there “pondering these things in her heart,” the way the original story reports it. Nicole was so quiet sitting beside her Mary forgot all about her. It was too late when she realized that she was no longer there.

Nicole was stomping her way to the manger when Mary’s eye caught a view of her. It was just like she had done in the rehearsal. This time though she stiffened when she got to the manger. It was obvious she was awestruck as she turned and hurried back to her seat beside Mary.

“He’s alive!” she whispered.

Someone across the aisle asked, “What did she say?”

“She said, ‘He’s alive!’” and the words rippled throughout the audience from one row to another. “He’s alive ... he’s alive ... he’s alive.” The air was electric throughout the room as one by one people in the congregation felt the living presence of the baby in Bethlehem.

A tough, unruly little girl had brought the Christmas message home. Jesus is alive! Emmanuel, God is with us! God incarnate – in the flesh.

Well, the lights went up and when the congregation stood to sing “Joy to the World!” the sound filled the church like never before. Mary put her arm around Nicole and said, “I love you.”

And Nicole replied, “I know.”<sup>2</sup>

“The Lord has anointed me to bring good tidings to the afflicted; he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound” were the words spoken by the prophet Isaiah in the 61<sup>st</sup> chapter to his people who were in dire need of some words of encouragement – some words of hope. Isaiah heard a voice in his heart and mind that suggested – that instructed him to offer a different word to his people than what they were used to hearing. Marcie’s grandmother and Mary heard a voice speak to their hearts and minds also. They model for us how Isaiah’s words speak to the situations around us in our day.

Marcie’s grandmother shared with her granddaughter about the grace those who loved her wished her to experience. She proclaimed liberty to one who was imprisoned by a cliché of society. And thus Marcie was freed from the belief that bound her and thus enabled to receive the unconditional love of others.

Mary offered Nicole unconditional love and thus brought her to the place where she could believe it and begin to see life through a new pair of eyes.

There's a difference in the message the scriptures invite us to consider on this third Sunday of Advent. Gone are the somber passages about the need for repentance and judgment. Today we are to pause and remind ourselves that even in the midst of the very roughest times in our lives – even when the world might judge us unworthy – God breaks through with a word of hope. Today we rejoice in the promises of God and the hope we know God will bring to pass.

Listen to some more of these wonderful words according to this great Isaiah passage: “He has sent me,” and now picking up the following: “To comfort all who mourn, and provide for those who grieve in Zion – to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair. They will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the Lord for the display of God's splendor. They will rebuild the ancient ruins and restore the places long devastated; they will renew the ruined cities that have been devastated for generations.”

The people of Israel and their prophet, Isaiah, had little reason to be hopeful. They had every reason to be pessimistic. Little had turned out for them as they had thought and hoped it would when they returned from their exile.

The role of the prophet varies according to the needs of the time. Sometimes their role is to be critical of something going on in the world. Sometimes their role is to tell forth – to warn – to caution – to point out an ill in society that is in need of being corrected in hopes that their words or actions might stimulate a changed direction. But at this point in Israel's history – in the face of the despair they were feeling – in the midst of their disappointment – the task of the prophet was to build-up, to comfort, to inspire, to speak words of encouragement and hope.

Friends, there are many who cross our paths on a daily basis in this day who are in desperate need of an encouraging word – of a word of hope – of a word or act that provides comfort. There are many who need to hear that they are loved – unconditionally – who need to hear us proclaim with confidence the good news Christmas shouts from the manger – “God is with us.” No matter what has happened – no matter what is going on in our world – the announcement of banks closing, of companies declaring chapter 11, of losses in our investment portfolios, of families in our midst losing their livelihoods or loved ones, or we hear about a break-up in a family – no matter what is going on around us, the word we must prophetically offer – the word those around us and yes, the word even we ourselves are in need of in this day is hope. “God is with us” in the midst of all we are facing. Because we believe it to be the case, we can with confidence prophetically announce to those in need of hearing it that God will provide – that God will bring healing – that God will be involved in the redeeming of God's land – that there are better days ahead.

Friends in Christ, as members of the community of faith, we are the ones, you see, who have been called to be today's prophets to one another and those around us who are in need of hearing a word of hope – who are in need of being offered hope. We are the ones God has called to stand alongside those who face the loss of their livelihood – who have been wounded by loved ones or the world – who are or are becoming fearful about the financial security of their future. Our role as prophets is not only to listen to the pain of those in need – the distraught – the wounded – but then to witness of God's unconditional love – to state our conviction that God will not abandon us in our turmoil. And it is by our resolve not to abandon those in need of that word – in need of hearing it spoken and experiencing it lived out by our actions – that hope catches on and is allowed to perform its healing ministry.

Today, people of God, we need to be ready to hear the voice of God say to us through the words of the prophet Isaiah, “I am with you in the midst of all you are experiencing.”

Let us pray.

1. John E. Sumwalt, “The Little Girl Who Didn’t Like Christmas Presents,” Forty Tellable Tales For Cycle B (Lima, Ohio: CSS Publishing Company, 1990), pp. 24-25.
2. Augsburg Sermons 3: Gospels, Series B (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1993), pp. 24-26.