

December 23-29, 2018
Pastor Kay Richter
New Evangelical Lutheran Parish
Ewen, Paynesville, and Trout Creek

Sunday, December 23, 2018

Read: Luke 1:39-55

Mary said, "My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord ..."

"Hmm," I said. "Either I've never noticed this before or I've been changing the lectionary readings for the last 20+ years without even realizing that I've been doing it." What I had not noticed is that the *Magnificat* – Mary's Song – was assigned **both** as the psalm for today **and** included as part of the Gospel reading. The Celebrate insert, which my parish uses for worship each week, has two different translations of it, but I'm sure worshippers will be thinking "that sounds familiar." Add to this repetition a couple hymns that are based on Mary's Song, and people will be walking out of worship feeling like they got caught in the movie *Groundhog's Day*.

Perhaps it is good for us to hear Mary's Song repeated a few times. Perhaps it will remind us to truly **listen** to Mary's words ... to listen to Mary's heart and soul. As Mary visits Elizabeth (who is five months or so into her miraculous pregnancy), Elizabeth declares Mary blessed by the Lord God and also praises God for the gift of Mary's visit – Mary, who will be the mother of the Lord. Mary responds to this blessing with her song of praise.

Mary praises God for blessings given to the lowly ... to Elizabeth, to herself, and to the children of Abraham. Elizabeth – old, childless, scorned by a society that viewed bearing children as the only value a woman had. Mary – young, unmarried, accused of promiscuity by a society that stoned women who betrayed the men who controlled them (father or husband). Abraham's offspring – a conquered people, subject to Roman authority, persecuted by the power of the Empire, trodden down and impoverished by the conquerors and their collaborators among their own people. Blessings – a reminder that God walks with those whom society has deemed outcast and a reminder that the powerful have shunned God by putting themselves into the spot reserved for the Lord.

Are you searching for God in our troubled world? Are you looking around and wondering where you can find the Lord? Listen again to Mary's Song. Pay attention to the oppressed and shunned and outcast. Mary's words remind us that God is with people such as these. Walk with them for a while in the midst of their struggles and you will begin to see God.

Let us pray: *Jesus, your mother Heavenly Father often show up in outcast. Help us to also keep that we may see you face-to-face.*



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Monday, December 24, 2018

Read: Luke 2:1-20

“... to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.”

As a child, there were certain TV Christmas specials that I **HAD TO** watch. The season was incomplete if I missed them. As an adult, I own these videos, so that I can continue to watch them in the days leading up to Christmas.

The first is *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*. As the Whos down in Who-ville sing a song welcoming Christmas, the Grinch stands “with his grinch feet ice-cold in the snow” puzzling how Christmas had come “without ribbons ... without tags ... without packages, boxes, or bags.” “Then the Grinch thought of something he hadn’t before! ‘Maybe Christmas,’ he thought, ‘*doesn’t* come from a store. Maybe Christmas ... perhaps ... means a little bit more!’”

And that leads to the second special – *A Charlie Brown Christmas*. Charlie Brown’s cry, “Isn’t there anyone who knows what Christmas is all about?!” is followed by Linus’ main stage speech. Linus, of course, is reciting Luke 2:8-14 from the King James Version of the Bible. These were probably the first scripture verses that I memorized, because I could recite them right along with Linus! “***That’s*** what Christmas is all about, Charlie Brown,” Linus concludes.

Perhaps you can relate to Charlie Brown as he pleads for the true meaning of Christmas, as we hear cries to “put Christ back in Christmas” and see houses brightly decked out with lights, Santa Claus, elves and snowmen. In the midst of the glitter and sparkle, we hear again the Grinch’s realization that Christmas doesn’t come from a store and we listen to Linus’ proclamation of the birth of the Savior which is Christ the Lord. And we are forced to puzzle and ponder the mixed messages we are receiving.

What makes Christmas ***truly Christmas*** for you? What will you treasure in your heart and ponder for years to come, as Mary pondered the words of the shepherds?

Let us pray: *Jesus, you arrived in a lowly manger. As we see bright lights and hear a mix of messages, help us to focus on you and the blessings that you bring to us and our world. Amen*



Tuesday, December 25, 2018

Read: John 1:1-14

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

When we think of Christmas, we probably think first of Luke 2, not John 1. And yet, this is a time when John's images of light piercing the darkness are precious words indeed. As we in the northern hemisphere know, darkness gets deeper and longer at this time of year. The "longest night" – the winter solstice – falls on December 21, when we spend roughly 15 hours in darkness waiting for the sun to rise again. We light the candles of Advent and we wait for the true light of the Christ to come into the world.

Some communities mark this longest night with a special worship – sometimes called a "Longest Night Service," sometimes called a "Blue Christmas" worship ... "blue" as in feeling sad and broken. For many, this Holy Season brings deep sadness and pain. Perhaps there is an empty place at the table – a loved one has died or a family has been broken and divided. Perhaps there is tension in the air – addiction or illness or conflict has brought strife rather than peace into the family gathering. Perhaps there is a longing for what has *never* been – that picture-perfect gathering seen on greeting cards simply does not exist in the real world.

Into this longest night, into these personal darkneses, the light of Christ comes – bringing hope. No amount of darkness can overcome the light of a single candle. No amount of brokenness can overcome the love of God shown in the birth of Jesus ... the Word made flesh ... our Holy God incarnate in our own flesh and blood.

Whether this Holy Day is filled with happiness or sadness, whether we find ourselves feeling deeply contented with life or overwhelmed by the brokenness surrounding us, we remind ourselves of God's actions on our behalf. Today, we remember that God sent light into the world – light no darkness can overcome.

Let us pray: *Jesus, you are the light of the world. Help us to see your light shining brighter than the artificial lights of the season. Help us also to see your light shining in the midst of the dark places in our lives. Amen*



Wednesday, December 26, 2018

Read: Acts 6:8-15, 7:51-60 (optional – read all of Luke 7)
Stephen, deacon & martyr

The Season of Christmas is twelve days long. It is sometimes quiet for church staff, since members are off celebrating the Holy Season with family and friends and most congregational programming takes a break. Worship services that fall on the Sundays of Christmas are planned well in advance, so that church staff can also enjoy some time with their families and friends.

Because of this break from regular routines and because I decided a while ago to write these devotions based upon the daily lectionary, I believe this is the first time that I've looked closely

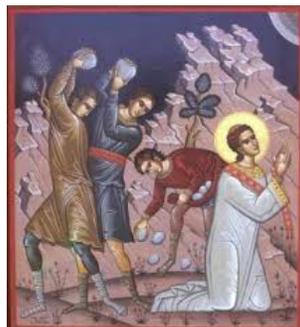
at the daily readings for the week following December 25. I had not realized that these days are filled with commemorations! Today, we remember Stephen.

As the community of believers grew, Jesus' apostles found themselves in an awkward position. They were overwhelmed with all the ministry tasks that were coming their way. Telling the stories of Jesus' life among them, leading the community in worship and the Lord's Supper, visiting the sick and praying with them, collecting and distributing resources among the members, and so many other things began to be too much. All of it was important and essential for the life of the community, but they needed help. They gathered the community and appointed seven men "full of the Spirit and wisdom" to supervise the important ministry of distributing food resources to the widows who needed them. These men became known as "deacons."

Deacon comes from the Greek word *diakoinia* – which means "to serve food" or "to wait tables". In the ELCA today, deacons are still set apart for this sort of ministry – the "Ministry of Word and Service." Following in the footsteps of those like Stephen, deacons tell the Good News of God through witnessing and meeting the day-to-day needs of the people. Often, that also means they are focused on matters of equity and justice within our communities. Stephen was killed for the witness that he gave with his life. We certainly hope that our ELCA deacons do not face such threats to life and limb as they do their ministry. However, we know that many who work for justice in our world are indeed on the front lines of protests and demonstrations, working with people whose basic daily needs are not being met. Far too often they *do* face violent opposition in the work they do.

During this Season of Christmas, we hear again the Good News proclaimed by Stephen and our current deacons. We are called to commit ourselves to this important ministry of caring for those in need – whether we bear the title Deacon or not. We are called to support our deacons and we are called to share our resources for the benefit of those in our communities who have need of those resources. We are called to *diakoinia* – serving others as our Lord has served us.

Let us pray: *Jesus, thank you for the powerful witness of Stephen and for the wisdom of the apostles who appointed him and the other deacons. Teach us to serve as Stephen did and to support those who so faithfully follow in his footsteps. Amen*



Thursday, December 27, 2018

Read: John 20:30-31, 21:20-25
John, apostle & evangelist

As you gather with family and friends this Holy Season, what stories will you tell? Will you laugh at misadventures that happened along the way? Will you cry at the mention of the person

who is no longer among you? Will you stop and smile because everyone already knows how THAT story ends? Is there someone among you who seems to be the designated storyteller, because they simply seem to capture the essence of the situation so much better than anyone else?

Today, we remember just such a storyteller ... John ... son of Zebedee ... brother of James ... a fisherman ... a follower of Jesus ... one of the twelve apostles chosen by Jesus to be sent out on specific missions ... the “witness” (evangelist) to whom the fourth Gospel is attributed, even though that “beloved disciple and witness” is never named within the Gospel itself ...

John’s Gospel tells us that Jesus did “many other” things that are not recorded within this document and that *these things* were written down ... these stories were told ... so that “you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you might have life in his name.” John’s Gospel is very different from the other three. The stories told do not overlap much with the stories in those other gospels. Yes, the story ends with Jesus’ death and resurrection, but the path to the cross and the response to the resurrection are described in very distinct ways!

A recurring theme in John’s Gospel is that seeing is believing. The refrain “come and see” calls us to follow along with Jesus and his disciples from the Jordan River where John is baptizing to the shores of Galilee where the risen Jesus shares a meal with his followers. Mary Magdalene’s witness to the other disciples is, “I have seen the Lord!” Thomas believes because he sees Jesus risen and alive. These stories are told so that by seeing – or hearing – we may also come to believe.

Stories are so much a part of who we are. The stories we tell shape our lives. The stories in the Gospels shape our lives of faith ... they make us who we are as followers of Jesus.

Let us pray: *Jesus, thank you for calling and sending people like John. Help us to listen to the stories of your life and to be shaped by them into your faithful followers. Amen*



Friday, December 28, 2018

Read: Matthew 2:13-18

The Holy Innocents, martyrs

It seems that we cannot read the newspaper or watch the evening news or pick up online networks without hearing yet another story of death and destruction somewhere in our world. World leaders are accused of arranging the murder of a rival or a critic, innocents are dying in refugee camps or in terrorist attacks, and people flee for their lives from places of poverty and oppression.

Today, we remember that these dynamics are not new to our world. Matthew's Gospel tells us that the Wise Men from the east stop and talk with Herod before they make their way to pay homage to the newborn King of Israel. Herod immediately plots to get rid of this rival to the throne. When his plans are foiled because the Wise Men don't return to him, he responds viciously by wiping out any child who *might* be the young boy king. He fails in his mission, because Jesus and his family flee – becoming refugees in a foreign country! We can hear echoes of this story of crushing oppression in the headlines of today. And we remember the many who have suffered at the hands of a powerful few.

A moment of silence, please, as we remember ...

Let us pray: *Jesus, we remember. We remember all those who have suffered at the hands of power-hungry leaders. Help us to be like the Wise Men, and yet also different from them. Help us to find ways to subvert cruelty and oppression in our world today, and not to just walk away. Amen*



Saturday, December 29, 2018

Read: 1 Chronicles 28:1-10
First Saturday of Christmas

Take a look at your church building. What is the first thing that you notice? Is it a large cross standing near the entry door? Is it the stained-glass windows depicting scenes from Jesus' life? Is it hidden behind large trees that have grown up over the years? Does it give honor to the God whom we gather to worship?

King David wanted to build a temple. That job was passed down to his son Solomon, however. David was known as a warrior. Solomon was noted for his wisdom. The temple was meant to be a "place of rest for the ark of the covenant" ... the ark carried by the people of Israel through the wilderness that contained a jar of manna, the tablets of the law, and Aaron's rod ... all signs of God's gifts to the community and God's continued care for the people whom God had called through Abraham.

When we look at our places of worship, what signs do we see of God's gifts to us? What signs do we see of God's provisions for our needs? What signs do we see of God's call to us to be faithful followers? How are we reminded of Abraham's faithful commitment to follow? How are we reminded of David's victory over seemingly unbeatable foes? How are we reminded of Solomon's humility in asking the Lord to give him wisdom for ruling his people?

Take a look at your life. Where do you hear God calling you to go? What foes are you facing that you need God's help to defeat? Where are you in need of God's wisdom?

Let us pray: *Jesus, come again into our lives today. Help us to see your presence with us. Teach us to accept the resources you provide for us, to use these resources to defeat the enemies that oppose your ways, and to walk humbly with you trusting in your wisdom to guide us into ways of peace. Amen*

