

THE FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Year B

December 18, 2011

2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16

Luke 1:26-38

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Concordia Evangelical Lutheran Church

Duluth, Minnesota

One of the Christmas cards my wife Lynn and I received this past week reads on the front, “One woman believed God . . . and carried the hope of the world!” The verse on the inside is from our gospel reading for today: “The angel said to her, ‘The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called the Son of God.’”

“One woman believed God . . . and carried the hope of the world!”

I led worship at the St. Louis County Jail this past Wednesday, which I do about once a month. Invariably I come away deeply moved by the experience. This past Wednesday was no exception.

When I arrived, I learned that John, the volunteer who comes every week to lead music with his guitar, was not able to come that day. I offered to play some Christmas carols on the old, very out-of-tune upright piano. The men and the women prisoners were let separately into the all-purpose room where the worship service is held, and a partition was drawn between them throughout the service so they were not able to see or speak with each other.

As the women were being let into the room, I was playing “Silent Night,” and on hearing the music, they spontaneously broke into song. Now I have heard them sing many times before when John plays his guitar with the prerecorded music he amplifies quite loudly though his portable sound system, and the women usually sing loudly and lustily with a heavy, full-throated, raucous sound. But this past Wednesday was different. When they heard “Silent Night” played quietly on the piano, the women sang with a beautiful and clear tone, perfectly in tune. When I complemented them, saying, “You sing like angels,” one of them responded, “That’s because we *are* angels,” to which the rest of them burst into gales of sarcastic laughter. It was funny, but it was not. Their sarcastic laughter made them sad.

After we concluded the singing of several carols—I was saddened that the only carol they could sing even one verse by heart was “Silent Night”—I preached a sermon with three main points.

First, I marveled that God should choose a woman’s womb as the vessel for the incarnation of Jesus. I talked about the First Lesson for today and King David’s desire to build a Temple—a house—for God. God insisted to David that God needs no temple, that

the heavens are God's temple. And yet, when the time came for God to come among us in the flesh, God chose a woman's womb as the vessel. I told the prisoners how truly astonishing this would have been for the Jewish culture of that time, when blood was considered unclean, and when the natural menstrual cycle rendered a woman unclean and ritually impure. How could it be that God, who needed no earthly temple, would choose such a vessel to carry the Son of God?

I told the prisoners that I was reminded of Peter's vision of the sheet filled with unclean animals being dropped from heaven and the voice of God saying, "Do not call unclean what I have called clean!" Could it be that our human categories of clean and unclean, or acceptable and unacceptable, even of good and bad, mean nothing to God?! Could it be that God can take anything that is despicable by human standards and declare it to be holy?! The angel said to Mary, "Therefore the child to be born shall be holy . . ."

The second point I made in my sermon at the jail this past Wednesday had to do with the barrenness of Elizabeth. Elizabeth was an elderly relative—perhaps cousin—of Mary. We remember the story of this same angel Gabriel coming to the old priest Zachariah, husband of Elizabeth, informing him that, even in their old age, Elizabeth, who had been without child, would conceive.

At the jail I talked about the notion of barrenness, that it has to do with more than being without children. I talked about the barrenness of unfulfilled dreams, of dashed hopes. I talked about the barrenness of empty and broken relationships. I talked about the barrenness of poor choices and self-destructive behaviors, and the barrenness of roadblocks and lost opportunities, the barrenness of disillusionment, bitterness, grief. The prisoners at the St. Louis County Jail know about barrenness. I suspect we all do.

I talked about God being a God who delights in surprising us in many and various and unexpected ways. I talked about God making all things new. I talked about God bringing joy out of sorrow and sadness.

Then I repeated what the angel Gabriel said to Mary: "For nothing will be impossible with God." I am reminded of a Christmas gift I received last year from a staff member. It's a glass and metal ornament with the inscription: "God specializes in things thought impossible."

The third point I made in my sermon at the jail had to do with Mary and her response, "Here I am, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Mary becomes the model of faith and humility. Mary offers herself completely to the will of God. She demonstrates belief and trust even when she does not completely understand the process. Mary shows us that, even when we do not understand our circumstances, we can trust God.

Martin Luther said that there are three miracles in our gospel for today. The first is that God and humanity should be united in the birth of this child. The second is that the mother would be a virgin. And the third was that Mary believed the angel. Luther said,

“Had she not believed, she could not have conceived.”¹ Luther maintained that, of the three miracles, this third one, that Mary believed, was the greatest.

This brings me back to the Christmas card we received this past week: “One woman believed God . . . and carried the hope of the world!”

I’d like to go back to the St. Louis County Jail this past Wednesday. I’d like to go back to those women singing “Silent Night.” When I complimented them, saying, “You sing like angels,” one of them responded, “That’s because we *are* angels,” to which the rest of them burst into gales of sarcastic laughter. It was funny, but it was not. Their sarcastic laughter made them sad, sad because they do not consider themselves to be angels. Rather, far from it.

But I think those women *just might be* angels. At least they were angels on Wednesday. They were angels on Wednesday because they sang like angels, and I was deeply moved by their singing.

Now I have heard “Silent Night” sung hundreds—maybe thousands—of times in my life as a musician and as a pastor, and I have heard it sung exquisitely many times by very fine soloists and choirs. But I will *never forget* the sound of those women dressed in their blue jail outfits singing ever so sweetly, ever so fervently, ever so longingly. And I’ll bet the men on the other side of the partition, not able to see them, but able to hear them, will also never forget the sweet sound of their singing. It was as if God had sent a room full of angels to sing love into our hearts. I only hope those women will remember it, too.

Thanks be to God!

¹Roland Bainton, ed., *Martin Luther’s Christmas Book* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1948), 15.