

Binkley Baptist Church

“Advent Sign-age: Love”

Advent IV

by The Rev. Dr. Marcus McFaul

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All around the country the signs point to Christmas and church signs announce: “A long time ago in a Galilee far, far away...” and, my favorite, “Christmas: A story about a middle eastern family seeking refuge,” re-affirming an important truth we all know—Christmas/Incarnation is as true and contemporary as this very minute and every new headline.

It’s impossible to imagine the crèche scene without children. The pageant is the thing today, the faces of pageant children and the faces of children everywhere. Lily white, bronzed and brown, skin with yellow hue children, all children of God.

A book many of you are reading right now, written by John Dominic Crossan and the late Marcus Borg, is entitled “The First Christmas.” Crossan and Borg help us see the birth narratives not as nostalgic, sentimentalized “cuddly baby Jesus” stories, but as edgy, challenging narratives that take on pious and political overtures. They argue that both Matthew and Luke use the birth stories as the gospel in miniature; that we are to look for their meaning and to find the signs of good news. This means that among other things these birth narratives demonstrate subversive, anti-imperial elements, that “Jesus is the Son of God (and the emperor is not), that Jesus is the savior of the world (and the emperor is not), that Jesus is Lord (and the emperor is not), that Jesus is the way to peace on earth (and the emperor is not).”

Borg and Crossan see the Gospel birth stories as “parabolic pageants.” It’s Luke’s pageant we saw reenacted earlier by our Binkley children. Luke is signaling his readers and listeners some important features not to be missed because if you miss them you miss everything that the gospel is.

What are Luke’s signs of good news of great joy?

Location—manger stable. Could a more upscale locale not be found? It’s not very tasteful what with the straw and livestock. The Christ-child is born not in a palace but more pasture-like than imaginable.

Characters—a pregnant, unmarried teenage girl carries the load in this pageant. In Matthew, Mary is passive and practically unseen. Joseph gets top billing—after Jesus—in Matthew’s pageant. But in Luke it is Mary’s story. In fact Luke’s emphasis on women is outrageously radical for the day—remember this is before Hillary—in our case, before Verla! Mary sings! In fact, that’s another feature in Luke’s pageant—music! His story has three hymns or canticles. Mary’s song, her Magnificat (“my soul magnifies”) a tribute to the God who remembers and blesses the poor and forsaken.

Luke is signaling that Mary’s humility will be the key to understanding just about everything the gospel is—a reversal of order in which the high and haughty are brought low and the humble-lowly lifted. Jesus will demonstrate that in his earthy life and ministry.

Emphasis on the marginalized. Luke will stress this aspect of good, glad gospel news more than anything else.

Shepherds. Not urban cowboys but migrant workers bouncing around desperate for work. Shepherds who possessed little status and met none of the requirements for religious acceptance—unable even to enter the Temple for cleansing and proper worship. After the actual birth—as the story tells it—it is THEY who are tapped on the shoulders: “an angel

of the Lord appeared to THEM?” “And the joy of the Lord shone around about THEM?” Yes, them. And they were terrified. Well, of course they were. But that very night they are told that a sign would be given to them, “this will be a sign for you, you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.” And every single Christmas since that first one we are invited to consider this: we will find ourselves in places where children will need a home, help, hospitality, and most of all love, and will we incarnate and embody the love of Jesus? Remember that church sign: Christmas is a story about a middle-eastern family seeking refuge. Still is.

In his delightful little book Good News from North Haven, Michael Lindvall traces the pastoral contours of a Presbyterian minister, Rev. David Battles, in backwater Minnesota; North Haven, Minnesota. Lindvall, himself a minister, unpacks what it means to be a clergyman battling, at times, a church that doesn't always know how to express gospel love. In the final chapter of the book entitled “Christmas Baptism” he describes a recent baptism and the custom it had of asking, “Who stands with this child?” Whereupon the whole extended family of the little one rises and remains standing for the ceremony. It was a baptism at Thanksgiving. Pastor Battles picks up the story:

*After church, everybody rushed home to turkey leftovers and I went back into the sanctuary to turn off the lights. A middle-aged woman, dressed Salvation Army style, was sitting in the front pew with a black plastic purse in her lap. I knew her as someone who always sat in the very last pew, as close to a door as possible, but I did not know her name. She seemed at a loss for words and was hesitant about looking at me for very long. She finally said her name was Mildred Cory and commented as to how lovely the baptism was. After another long pause she said that her daughter, Tina, had just had a baby and, well, the baby ought to be baptized, shouldn't it?*

*I suggested that Tina and her husband should call me and we would discuss the appropriateness of baptism. Mildred hesitated again, and then catching and holding my eyes for the first time, said, “Tina's got no husband; Tina's just eighteen and she was confirmed in this church four years ago. She used to come out for the Senior High Fellowship, but then she had started to see this older boy out of high school.” She hesitated for a moment, gathered her courage, and let the rest of the story tumble out fearlessly: “Then she got pregnant and decided to keep the baby and she wants to have it baptized here in her own church, but she's nervous to come and talk to you, Reverend, She's named the baby James,” she said, “Jimmy.” I said that I would bring the request to the church board for approval.*

*When the matter came up at the meeting, there was a moot question or two about why in the world Tina Cory was keeping the baby. I had started to explain what everyone already knew, namely, that Tina was a member of the church, an unwed mother, and that I didn't know who that father was. They all knew who the father was, of course, this was a small town. The father was young Jimmy Hawthorne, who had recently chosen a career in his nation's armed forces and was now completing basic training at Fort Bragg.*

*The real problem was the picture of the baptism that we all had in our heads. Tina, pimples on her chin, little Jimmy in her arms, big Jimmy long fled to North Carolina, and Mildred Cory the only one who would stand when the question was asked. It hurt to think of it, but they approved it, of course. The baptism was scheduled for the last Sunday of Advent.*

*The church was full, as it always is the Sunday before Christmas. The rumored snow had not yet come, though the sky heavy with it. After the sermon, the elder who was to assist me in the baptism stood up beside me at the baptismal font and read the words I had written out on a three-by-five card: “Tina Cory presents her son for baptism.” He kept looking at the card and not at Tina, who was rising to come forward, as if there was some further point he wished to make.*

*Down the aisle she came, smiling at me only, shaking slightly with month-old Jimmy in her arms, a blue pacifier stuck in his mouth. The scene hurt, all right, every bit as much as we knew it would. So young this mother was and so alone. One could not help but remember another baby boy born long ago to a young unwed mother in difficult circumstances.*

*I read the opening part of the service, noting Mildred Cory sitting strangely out of place in a front pew. Then I asked, "Who stands with this child?" I nodded at Mildred slightly to coax her to her feet. She rose slowly, looking to either side, and then returned my smile.*

*My eyes went back to my service book. I was just about to ask Tina the parents' questions of commitment when I became aware of movement in the pews. Angus MacDowell had stood up in his blue serge suit, Minnie beside him. Then a couple of elders stood up, then the sixth-grade Sunday School teacher stood up, then a new young couple in the church, and soon, before my incredulous eyes, the whole church was standing up with little Jimmy. Tina was crying of course, and Mildred Cory was holding on to the pew in front of her as though she was standing on the deck of a ship rolling in a great wind, which, in a way, she was.*

*Every eye was on the child, who was for a moment everybody's baby.*

*The scripture reading that morning had been some verses from 1 John: "See what great love the Father has given us that we should be called the children of God...No man has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us...there is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear." In that baptism, those old words came alive. They were clothed in flesh and everybody saw it. (Lindvall, Good News from North Haven, pgs. 184-187).*

So I ask you today, who stands with Syrian refugees? Who stands with this beautiful Vietnamese family, the Siu, in their attempt to relocate their daughter and grandchildren? When we welcome the forsaken & the forgotten, we welcome the Christ child. When we stand up for children from Syria, Christ is born. When we stand up for homeless children who have been kicked out of their homes because they are gay or lesbian, Christ is born. Whenever and wherever you look after the least of these you are incarnating the Christ and signaling to all the gospel. It's not just about a long time ago in a Galilee far, far, away but about today. Here and right now. Who will stand with these children? Who will stand with Jesus? A sign of love is when you stand with children, all the children of the world.

Thanks be to God. Amen. And amen.