

Church of the Good Shepherd and St. John the Evangelist

4th Sunday of Advent
December 24, 2006
Fr. Bill McGinty

“Dire Straits”

Today is the fourth Sunday of Advent. All the scripture readings today speak of the coming of the Messiah into the world. It is the culmination of the Advent time of preparation. During the four weeks of Advent the readings from scripture have invited us to pause and reflect on what Christ truly means in our life. We have journeyed through the Old Testament and listened to the words of the Prophets fore telling the coming of the Holy One of God.

The story that Luke tells in today’s Gospel account is a magical story to stir the imagination. It is the story of Mary setting out on this long journey to visit her cousin Elizabeth. It was probably a journey fraught with danger. In Elizabeth Luke finds confirmation of the Mary story and Mary exclaims her praise of God in her great prayer: The Magnificent.

Elizabeth’s husband Zechariah is a priest in the Temple of Jerusalem, yet it is not from Zechariah’s house that the Messiah comes or from the House of Kings, but as Mary explains: God has raised up the lowly.

This is a common theme in Luke’s Gospel. It is the idea that God rejects the proud and the mighty and instead he uses the weak, the poor and the humble to achieve his ends. Subsequently, Luke’s Gospel is often spoken of as a Gospel for the marginalized. It is a theme that runs the length of the Gospel and has Jesus supporting every hopeless case. Yet it is best illustrated in the birth narrative. Luke is the only Gospel to depict Jesus being born in lowly circumstances and in a stable. And it is not wise men or Magi that visit Jesus in his humble circumstances but shepherds who have been watching their sheep on the hillsides.

This year the response to the poor, the disadvantaged and the marginalized in Pike County and in our Tri-State area has been wonderful. The spirit of Christmas and the meaning of the Christmas story have moved many people both to give and to serve. That spirit has been in evidence since Thanksgiving with folks from the seven churches filling the Food Pantry week after week.

Gift Sunday saw a flow of gifts into the church for children in the area. This culminated on Friday night with the distribution to dozens of families here at the Food Pantry. Once again our mystery Santa delivered 28 bicycles and dozens of wrapped gifts which appeared in the church Friday morning. Into many lives and tragic stories a hope and joy came this year. These efforts do not find people jobs or housing, nor do they pay the mortgage or replace a failed car, but they do show that Christians care and are willing to go the extra mile for their fellow brothers and sister.

The Rev. William J. McGinty, Rector
110 West Catharine Street, Milford, Pennsylvania 18337
Phone: (570) 296-8123 ♦ Fax: (570) 296-4383

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The story of the little family that makes their way to Bethlehem has become symbolic of the blight of all families who are homeless or in need.

In recent years and months we have had occasions when circumstances have been so dire that, many of us working in the church have longed for us to own a property where we could put people up. If only for a few nights or weeks, we would like to have operated a shelter, an Inn, an old house that would take individuals in out of the cold and allow them time and opportunity to get their lives back together till they can afford a place of their own. In January I will be writing to the Bishop and looking to see what help is available because we know that this has been done in other places. Bethany ministries in Bethlehem run affordable housing for seniors and poor people.

If it had happened to us once or twice in the last four years that we needed such a place for a family, Debbie and I would have dismissed it. But for it to happen many times prompts us with the words of the Gospel to conclude that God is speaking to us: "For whenever you did it to the least of these my brothers and sisters you did it to me."

Taken in this light the Christmas story is but a key. It is a key that unlocks the true meaning of Jesus' teaching at the Sermon on the Mount. It is the key to what we should be doing for the rest of the year, but the two things together and you having the living Gospel as spoken by Christ himself.

"Go the extra mile, if you have two coats, give to those who have none. For the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many."

The Christmas message is the message and the Gospel of love that Jesus speaks about. It asks us only to judge ourselves. It forces us to look at the Prince of Peace, the Son of God in the poverty of the stable and it invites us to help. If we feel that compassion it commands us and obliges us to go out and do the same in our harsh world of grim realities.

As we prepare for the coming of Christ this evening let us cherish the fact that we live among people who do live the Spirit of this Christmas story. Let us celebrate this Christmas Spirit in our families this year and teach it to our children.

Let us pray:

Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. May your Kingdom come among us on this Christmas Eve.

We pray that the Peace and love your son brings into the world may pervade our lives too and fill our homes and families this Christmas

This we ask in Jesus' name.

Amen+

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