

NATIVITY – TELLING THE STORY AGAIN

We're about to stand on holy ground and we have to get ready. We can't just let it happen – though we know that Christmas will happen whether we are ready or not. It is an important thing we are about to do – important and holy – far more important than shopping – and certainly more holy. We can't let something so important and so uncommonly holy just happen.

Soon – very soon – we will pause once more in time and wrap ourselves in the mantle of eternity remembered. On Christmas Eve, while standing at a particular place, we will gaze once more into the flesh of our finite fingers as we close them gently about a candle – a candle held in memory of infinity once visited. From that posture of memory we will wait – wait with certainty – confident of that other moment when time will at last meet infinity again. For such an event as will happen on Christmas Eve we cannot be unprepared. We must make a careful plan.

There were once two women who made plans – special women – special plans. Cousins – one too old to be expecting a baby – the other, too young. They met and talked and planned. They were women into whose lives the hope of the world had been entrusted.

Luke opens the window on their conversation:

Blessed are you among women, says the older to the younger. When I heard your voice the baby leaped in my womb!

That movement of the unborn babe is a sure sign of God's will unfolding – of God's inspiration.

My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour, replies the younger to the older.

Right away we recognize that this is no ordinary conversation between cousins – no casual talk between hopeful women. They knew in their hearts that the inspired will of God was unfolding in their lives. They had to make ready.

We have to get ready too – John the Baptist and the prophets of the Old Testament we have been reading over the past weeks have all called us to prepare. We can't just let Christmas happen – though we know of course that Christmas will happen whether we are ready or not.

Have you been getting ready? Doing those special tasks that prepare the way – set the scene – mark the season? I have baked and wrapped and decked the halls. I have removed the tissue and set out the nativities – yes I have more than one group of manger scene ornaments to enjoy each year. One is miniature – fine and detailed. It isn't very expensive I suppose but because it is so small I worry about losing a piece.

This nativity is also special because of how I came to have it. This set was a gift from a Grade 4 student I was teaching. Usually children in my class would wrap their gift in fancy paper and bring it to the school on the last day of school – maybe they would not be able to wait and would bring it early but I always waited to open them just before dismissing for the Christmas break. However this was different. I received an envelope twelve days before Christmas. It had letters cut from magazines to spell out a message I can't exactly recall but I knew I had to open the envelope and that it was from a mystery person. Inside was one tiny ornament. Each of the next eleven days I found another envelope – sometimes at school – sometimes at home – sometimes at my church. I was so enjoying the anticipation of each day and the pleasure of each ornament as it arrived. That someone would go to such trouble made me feel special – blessed.

The joy of that season and the joy of those token gifts reminded me again of the wonder of Christmas – pulled me back into the holiness of what was happening. The ornaments were carefully positioned – they were not to be played with – they were important and they spoke to me of the holy and precious that is not to be touched. Perhaps one way that we prepare ourselves for Christmas – which will come whether we are ready or not – is to remember the unfolding will of God that is unspeakably holy – precious and not to be touched.

In the story of getting ready for the birth of Jesus, the older woman was named Elizabeth and her baby would be called John – John the Baptizer. The younger woman in the story was named Mary and her baby would be Jesus. What a story! From the very beginning the church remembered the story of Jesus and told it by word of mouth from generation to generation. Eventually the story was written down so as not to be forgotten as time passed. Several people wrote the story of Jesus – we know of the four saved by our tradition: Matthew, Mark, Luke, John. Only two tell the story of the birth of Jesus – Matthew and Luke. Only one remembered to save the remarkable story of two women getting ready – ready for Christmas.

This is a story about getting ready for Christmas. We have to get ready. We can't just let Christmas happen – though of course the divine will of God unfolds whether we are ready or not.

Mostly, I feel ready. I have my delicate miniature nativity carefully placed in a safe spot and I have the other scene set out as well. My other manger figures can't even be called ornaments. They are chunky pieces of soft wood painted to give the impression of an angel, a shepherd and a king, a sheep and donkey and camel, a young couple and their infant child. The rustic shelter is basic too – nothing remotely precious about this nativity.

I bought this set for myself sometime before the boys were born. I wanted figures that were supposed to be handled – manhandled – boy-handled! I knew it couldn't break no matter how many times it was brought down from the shelf and used. It is meant for touching – for reenactment – for play. This set is intended to be used in telling the story – believing that you are part of the story.

What is this thing we do at Christmas? As we remember – as we prepare? Is it something so holy it cannot be touched – can we only stand quietly and pray? Is it something so human and ordinary that it must be touched and held and used?

Both – of course – both are true. When we get ready for Christmas and hear again the story of the birth of Jesus we are in a holy time and place that calls out for our hands-on participation – divine and human without separation.

As we prepare again to hear the story told we stand in time and wrap ourselves in the mantle of eternity remembered. Here with these finite fingers we are allowed for a moment to touch the memory of infinity that happened then in the birth of a babe and happens now as something is reborn in each one of us. It is the hope we have in the unfolding will of God.

Luke wrote the story to save it forever in our hearts and minds. He wrote it in a world devoid of hope. Luke wrote his story of Jesus against a hopeless setting beginning in a unique way with the remarkable account of these significant women. They were women filled with hope as they got ready for Christmas – got ready for the inspiration of God unfolding in their lives.

This is the story the church must tell. No matter what is happening in our world, this is the story the church must live and about which the church must sing. Precious and holy – simple and rough – we tell the story again and again, believing that we are part of the good news we share. **Amen**



This Sermon Copy reflects the style of the spoken word rather than the written word. Allowances should be made for grammatical style and sentence structure that are characteristic of the spoken word. It is an adaptation of *Mary's Song* by James S. Lowry found in his book of biblical meditations entitled, Low-back, Ladder-back, Cane-bottom Chair. The Rev. L. T. Kavanagh, 2009