

"TAKING THE STABLE IN STRIDE"
(Sermon by Rev. Don Parsons)

Scripture Lesson:- Luke 1: 39 – 55

Well here we are at the fourth and final Sunday of Advent, and although we're getting closer to Bethlehem, we're not quite there yet. The baby is due anytime, but aside from a few twinges, the water has not broken, the full contractions have not yet begun.

All we can do now is wait,
and as we all know, waiting is perhaps the hardest part.

// I have sat in the waiting room of the hospital, catching up on magazines that are two years old, blankly watching but not taking in the images flashing on the television screen a few feet away. You have been there too. You look at the clock and it's ten after nine.

A couple of hours later you look again, and it's twenty after nine.

The day just droning on in slow motion while through the double doors at the end of the hall, the OR staff in their sanitized greens try to do their medical miracle with someone you love.

Sometimes *the waiting room* is the most stressful room in the hospital.

You don't have any information; you feel helpless; you can't do anything... except wait... //

And that is where we are today.

As much as we would like to make a beeline to that Bethlehem barn, even the gospel named by the lectionary for today seems to be holding us back – Mary and her visit with Elizabeth. Mary has received the news that she is pregnant, packed her things, and traveled the 100 miles or so to the home of Zachariah and Elizabeth. The two cousins it seems, are both "great with child".

They compare pre-natal notes on what having a baby might be like.

And after Elizabeth gushes about how blessed Mary is,
and how honoured she (Elizabeth) is to have "the mother of (her) Lord"
visiting her, Mary sings that beautiful, revolutionary song we know as
"The Magnificat" – "My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour...."

Both Mary and Elizabeth know how beautiful, and anxious, how hopeful, and fearful pregnancy is.

For them... for us, it is a time of waiting... and getting ready...

Maybe that is why it is not a bad thing for us, in the season of expectation, to spend so much of our time and energy getting ready. "Let every heart, prepare him room..." we sing far too easily.

Because we know that "preparing him room", if we do it right, will demand a great deal from us. "Preparing him room" has to do with being ready for the possibility of this Holy Child coming alive within us.

I wonder if we can ever be ready for that kind of Christ-event in our lives.

Maybe that is part of the truth of Christmas – that try as we might, none of us is ever fully prepared for God to come alive within us.

Do you think Mary was really prepared to hear the out-of-the-blue angelic greeting which interrupted

her sleep that night in Nazareth?

Artists of every era and culture have tried to capture that moment for us,
preserving Mary and the angel in wood and paint and stained glass.

She always seems to be depicted as a demure young woman, dressed in yards of sky-blue
silk, a complexion without blemish, and manicured fingernails.

She looks so composed that it is hard to remember that she is probably in her early teens as she
listens intently to the message brought to her by the angel Gabriel.

He told her what the child was to be named, and who he would become,
and something about the mystery that was to come upon her as the mother of God.

And then, "You mustn't be afraid, Mary," he said.

But it is striking, is it not? - the news that God had decided to come and live among us on earth,
trading Old Testament power and might for diapers and a teething ring.

Is there any adequate way to prepare for *that* kind of message?

I doubt that Mary was as ready to be so "highly favoured" as Luke makes her out to be.

Certainly those smelly shepherds huddling around their campfire were not ready.

There they were, minding their own business, as the midnight sky began to shimmer with
holiness, and music far more ethereal than anything Handel or Bach would try to write
later, enveloped them like Dolby Surround Sound.

Even though they were living in the midst of "the Messianic Hope", the people of Bethlehem certainly
did not really expect that the Messiah could be born right under their noses, in their out-of-the-
way village. How many were just a few feet from that holy nursery of a barn, and could
have become a figure in the Christmas pageant if they had been more open to God's
lively presence moving among them that noisy, crowded night.

So perhaps this is the question:- Are any of us ever really ready for Christmas?

is there such a thing as being fully prepared for God coming alive in our midst?

// I'd like to suggest that Samuel Zwemer may have come close. He was a pioneer, a missionary to
Arabia. It was said of him that even though "he worked always in life's stables,
he kept his eye on the vision of the Christmas star."

I like that - always working in the stables, but the star... the star...

Zwemer was no stranger to the tragic in life.

He was living and working far away from home when he received news that his four-year-old
daughter Ruth, and his seven-year-old daughter Katharina had died within the span of
eight days...

Now how in the world do you survive, do you get through something like that?

Someone who knew Samuel Zwemer well (Ernest Campbell) suggested that if we have
"a star in our soul, it is possible to take the stable in stride." //

Perhaps that is a clue for us - taking the muck and mire of the stable - the pungent smell, the shuffling
animals, the biting breeze leaking through the cracks in the barn board, the shriek of labour --
taking the stable in stride because we also notice that there is a star to follow, a baby to
cuddle, the power of love that transforms ordinary stable life into something that is
beautiful, and holy, and life-giving, and good.

Maybe that is something of what Mary's visit to Elizabeth was all about;
and why these pre-Christmas days are so important to us.

It has to do with being as adequately prepared as we can be, so that even when life is
devastating and raw, with starlight in the soul we might find a way to take the
stable in stride...

A couple of suggestions that might help to awaken the starlight in the soul...

// First above all, may I invite you to practice noticing the baby's presence in your own everyday?

Think of all the Christmas carols that undergird our shopping in every mall and store these days.

What if we sing or hum along, not just mouthing the words without noticing what they
mean, but singing the carols to ourselves as an act of faith,
as music that expresses the deep of who we are.

What if we paused in front of each Bethlehem scene – crèches on lawns, and in parks, and in some store
windows, and on mantels, and here in our own beautiful church –

what if we paused before each crèche and whispered "O come to us, abide with us,
our Lord Emmanuel."

What if, when we hear the Christmas gospel, we imagine rubbing shoulders with the shepherds,
or offering in the spirit of the Magi some very generous gift for someone else...

What if we imagine Mary looking at us and saying, "Would you like to hold him?"

What would it feel like to you to cradle God's presence in your arms?

What if you filled your Christmas cookies not only with sugar and flour and eggs and such,
but also as you mixed and rolled and patted and shaped these treats you also whispered a prayer,
or sang a Taize chant, or sent thoughts of love to someone you are concerned about.

What if your Christmas cookies became "prayer cookies"?

What if each time you turn on your tree-lights, you remember something John wrote about Jesus
being the light of the world, and the darkness never snuffing out his light?

What if you made your Christmas tree a Christ-light tree?

Oh, it would probably look exactly the same... and yet it would not look the same, would it?

What if, as we open the Christmas cards we now find in our mailbox, we ponder each greeting with
care, and realize that the person who signed the card chose it especially for us.

What if, as you invite someone for lunch,

or you send Christmas greetings to your friends – even by email,

you take note of the gratitude you feel for this person in your life?

What if, somehow, without making a big deal about it, as you take a tid-bit of bread and a sip of juice
this morning, you are able to open yourself to the presence of Holy Love coming alive in you? //

Perhaps such small moments in these waning days of preparation, just might bring light to the soul,
so when we get to the manger later this week, the Christ-child will come alive for us... in us...

Amen.