

Advent 4B, December 21, 2008
Church of the Reformation—Lutheran, Affton, MO
Text: Luke 1:26—38

The Lord Is with You

Before I start this sermon, there one thing I need to know. By a show of hands, who has been in or been involved with a Christmas pageant, whether it be for church, school, or Sunday School? Good. Now you will know what I will be talking about. Perhaps you have read or at least heard of *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever*, a delightful book by Barbara Robinson. She writes an uproarious, irreverent, deeply moving account of an unforgettable Christmas pageant at Second Presbyterian Church, in which the chief culprits were the horrible Herdmans. They were **“absolutely the worst kids in the history of the world. They lied and stole and smoked cigars (even the girls) and talked dirty and hit little kids and cussed their teachers and took the name of the Lord in vain and set fire to Fred Shoemaker’s old broken-down toolhouse.”** What the six Herdmans—Claude, Leroy, Ralph, Imogene, Ollie, and Gladys—do to the Nativity is a story you’ll have to read for yourself.

What is common between the book and real life is how, in countless churches, eight-year-old shepherds in their fathers’ bathrobes, their mothers’ sandals, and fake beards will call come and kneel before nailed-together mangers with dolls taking the place of baby Jesus, only to be greeted by sullen eleven-year-old Josephs and sheet-cloaked Marys watched over by tinsel-and-glitter-glued angels adorned in twin-bed sheets. Despite the hours of rehearsal, there are always some surprises in the final presentation. Costumes seem to come apart, lines, once memorized, evaporate into thin air, and awkwardness is probably the best adjective for the whole event.

Now you know, that in our hands, the people of the first Christmas come out looking as religious and inspired as those depicted in Hallmark greeting cards, holiday TV specials or church-sponsored live nativity scenes. In those presentations, Elizabeth, Mary, Joseph, and the shepherds seem so sure of what they are doing and the parts they are to play in the coming the Christ. As if carefully rehearsed for 2000 years, Mary and Joseph make their entrances on cue, meet Gabriel, confidently go through the birth experience, receive a few shepherds and wise men, and then exit majestically for Egypt.

We have heard the Christmas story and read it so many times (is that the reason so few show up on Christmas day—because they think they know how it ends) that neither we nor Mary is surprised when the angel tells her she is to be a mother and tells Joseph not to fear. In our version, Mary believes she is “blessed” and Joseph is not confused. Knowing how the story will end, everyone is in complete control and the whole things goes off without a hitch.

Maybe that is why we need the children’s Christmas pageants, given that they never seem to work that way. No matter how fine the bathrobes or how much hay is used on the stage, something invariably goes wrong. Mary, Joseph, and the rest of the cast never seem to look as dignified, as pious, or as sure of themselves as they do on a Christmas card. The shepherds usually act as confused and dumbfounded as the sheep they are to watch over. The wise men may look overdressed, but rarely do they look over-wise. The preteen Joseph seems to be embarrassed to be standing that close to Mary (let alone any other girl at that age), and Mary, despite her efforts to look like one who is “blessed among women,” always looks like one who is confused and bewildered, who has not the slightest idea of what to do with a baby, much less

know what her next line is to be. No, rarely are the Christmas pageants the version that we envision for that first Nativity.

Matthew and Luke, in their accounts of the Nativity, suggest that all was not as tied down and religious and neat as we like to tell it. That first Advent was a little confusing and unnerving. It should; it all had to do with God—the Lord of lords, King of kings, Suffering Servant, Prince of Peace, becoming flesh and dwelling among us.

Mary did not look much like the queen of heaven that night in Bethlehem; certainly not the **“quiet and gentle and kind”** that are the qualifications for the person to play Mary as described in *The Best Pageant Ever*. Even Martin Luther thought she looked like a rather confused, bewildered teenager like one from a local church youth group, more apt to giggle in nervousness and without the slightest idea of what to do with a baby or what her next line was to be. Joseph was probably embarrassed, because he in an embarrassing situation. Despite all the talk about **“Fear not,”** the shepherds were as scared as you or I would be if something similar happened to us while we were at work. There was no time to rehearse, time to retake the picture. It all just happened.

Yet this is how God is with us. This is Immanuel. Like Mary, Joseph, the shepherds and the rest, we are busy at home minding our own business, falling in love, getting engaged, making plans, paying taxes, complaining about the government, hosting strange relatives from the East, plodding through the everyday-ness of our lives. Then God chooses us to reveal something of Himself to the world, to perform some act of love through us. And, whether we like it or not, or

have the ability or experience, we are pushed onto the stage of life to act out our parts, with stage fright, filling roles too big for us, wondering what our next line will be.

Yet we go on with our daily vocations, because the Lord is with us, because of Immanuel. Not that we are good enough to be favored by God, but because out of God's mercy, He favors us with His love, a love for the world that brought His angel Gabriel to "a city of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph." God's love for us prompted the angel to announce to Mary, "**Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call His name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to Him the throne of His father David, and He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of His kingdom there will be no end.**" That love of God would lead to the cross where Christ would rule His kingdom. With His death on the cross and with His resurrection from the dead, Christ forgives all our sin, including those times we lack faith in His abilities and His promises.

Through His Word, God still gives the promise of His presence. Through His Word and Sacrament, God is with us. Through the Holy Spirit working through His Word and Sacraments, God gives us faith just as He gave faith to Mary, faith to respond, "**Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.**" God gives us faith to believe His Word through the prophet Isaiah, "*To us a child is born, to us a son is given.*" "**Given and shed for you.**" Immanuel, God with us.

If by chance some winged angelic messenger from God should appear to us this season, whether it be the angel Gabriel or an angel like ones we usually see this time of year, an angel around 8 or 9 years old, wearing a bed sheet and tennis shoes and Levis, topped with a halo and cardboard wings, the message will be the same as the one spoken to Mary, **“Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!”** And with you and you and you....

(With gratitude to William Willimon for the concept of this sermon.)

Henry V. Gerike