

Luke 1: 39-55

December 20, 2009 Advent 4 – Love

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Boy, oh boy, I have been in a quandary this week. I have been reading commentaries and past sermons of a variety of ministers to try to formulate just the right message for us this fourth week of advent. This week we light the candle of Love and read the Song of Mary in our gospel. What a great topic, love. What a wonderful message as we come into these final days before the birth of Christ; the moment we have been anticipating and waiting for.

Can you hear a “but” coming? Can you anticipate the down-turn of this? It is inevitable that I will burst the bubble of our dream of the perfect Christmas, filled with love and family and good news. We should know by now, as Christians, the good news does not always at first seem that good but in the end always turns out that way. And so I invite you to anticipate the end, the good news at the end of this sermon.

But first...What do you think of when you think of people in poverty? What do they look like? Where do they live? Most of us here in mainstream Canada have not seen true poverty; that we know of. Of course some of you have travelled to Haiti or Cuba; maybe some of you have been to India or Africa and seen true poverty. Some of us have seen it on TV or in movies. All of the characters in our Christmas story today are poor and the gospel of Luke wants us to know it.

What I want to do is to take us back in time; back to the first chapter in the gospel of Luke; the first Christmas pageant, the original not in black and white oh no I want us to see it in full colour which is code for let's get the real story.

Let's look at the cast of characters in that first pageant. First is Elizabeth and Zechariah; that elderly couple who had tried for years to have children. Zechariah has received a promotion within the temple where he works as a priest. Everyday Priests were poor; dirt poor; not the High Priest – they were rich, but Zechariah was not a High Priest he was a common priest. A promotion was in job alone, not income. Zechariah was promoted to the incense room; into the inner sanctum of the temple a place of danger and intrigue. Danger, because it was said that if you entered this area of the Temple without a pure heart – “squeaky clean really – you would be burned to a crisp upon entering.

To add to that pressure, when Zechariah enters he is confronted with an angel and Zechariah becomes hysterical, terrified; to make matters worse he is told by the angel that his wife, Elizabeth, will have a son and call him John. Zechariah asks the angel for a sign that this is true, as if seeing an angel isn't sign enough. The angel in return makes Zechariah mute and he will remain mute until the baby is born and named. Suddenly, Zechariah, the poor, common priest has lost his voice, his livelihood. Nine months later Elizabeth gives birth, in poverty, to a boy and he is named John; which by the way, was not what the woman of the community, who named the babies thought it

should be since there were no John's in the family line. But when they look to Zechariah he confirms the name of the baby will be John and his voice returns.

Next in the cast of characters is perhaps the most important character Mary, an unwed, approximately, 13 year old servant girl. A servant girl had no place of status in the caste system; she was one of the poorest, of the lowest caste in her society which was built by caste systems. She was not a fresh faced 13 year old like we might have here on a Sunday morning. No video games and sports activities; no 4H club or brownies and Guides. She was a servant. She was learning from the older women in her household how to cook, clean, and serve. Dirt poor, she would be given in marriage to Joseph, a man much older than her, to whom she was betrothed, promised.

The song of Mary in Luke tells us that Mary said: "For you have looked with favour upon your lowly servant." "Lowly" is referring to her poverty, her caste. She is not the daughter of a dignitary, or doctor, or lawyer. She herself did not go to school, she was a servant of low class. Dirt poor. When her baby was born, it was not born in a hospital or birthing centre with clean linens and sterilized equipment. Remember, she went through the same birthing process as every other woman here who has had children, only with no epidural or drugs, no doctors or nurses. There may not have even been a midwife, unless the inn keeper's wife came to help. But we do not know for sure. Our story jumps from arriving at the Inn to wrapping the baby in bands of cloth. There is no information on the birth itself, how it went, who was there etc. Imagine the fear and the pain of being 13 and giving birth to your first child in a stable. We have romanticized this Christmas story, to a warm and fuzzy stable. Our nativity scenes offer us glowing light and a cozy setting, clean, soft hay, with all the animals standing around in awe of this birth. But it would not have been this way.

It was a stable, a crude, smelly, damp and cold stable. With real smelly cows and sheep and other animals. With real manure and urine. Reeking of poverty. Jesus was born into poverty; real poverty.

Next in our play are the shepherds. Do you know about shepherds? Not a very good lot, those shepherds. Certainly not anyone you would want around your baby. Shepherds were not known for their good, clean, moral living. They were dirty, vulgar; they lacked any kind of moral integrity. The name shepherd was synonymous with thief. In fact one of the reasons they watched their flocks at night was because shepherds were known to steal each other's sheep. No, shepherds were not known to be star-gazing dreamers casually hanging out in the fields at night. They were poor, rejected members of the community that ran in their own crowd.

And so here they are the cast of characters as given to us by Luke; all living in poverty, real poverty. Some of you may be saying well what about the 3 Wise men, the kings who came to see Jesus. Well, they don't appear in Luke's story; Luke wants us to recognise the reality of the birth of Jesus. The good news in this story; that Jesus came to and for the poor; Luke wants us to focus on the purpose of Jesus coming. Luke does not want our Christmas celebration to be only about the family celebration; he wants us

to invite the poor into the celebration. Jesus, in this same gospel, later in his life, told many stories of inviting the poor, the maimed, the blind and the lame to the feast. That is what Christmas is all about, in Luke's original Christmas pageant. Without this spirit of the original Christmas pageant, a contemporary Christmas degenerates into a Roman Saturnalia which was a Roman family festival where families gathered with their own people and no outsiders were allowed into their family circle. It was nothing but self-indulgent family tradition. Is your Christmas tradition more like a Roman Saturnalia?

Our romanticized version of the Christmas story overshadows the reality of the celebration which is a feast for the poor. Christmas should remind us that the poor are to be exalted, to be raised up out of poverty into a place of status and dignity; the hungry are to be fed; the handicapped nourished. This is the meaning behind the real Christmas pageant and in the words of Ebenezer Scrooge "should be kept all through the year".

Everything else is an add on. St. Nicolas was added in 350 AD when a Bishop in Turkey began giving gifts to poor children not because they wrote letters to him but to keep the Christmas story - to give to the poor; to lift them up, to feed them. He did not give gifts to the rich or to the good children to keep them good all year round. It was about the poor.

We all have our Christmas traditions and we wouldn't change them or miss them for the world but the gospel of Luke reminds us that on this last Sunday before Christmas God's love for all of us, even the lowest of the world, was so great that Jesus was born among us, in poverty, to a poor servant girl, surrounded by the lowest people, in the most unlikely of places to teach us to love one another regardless of class or caste. To remind us that those of us with means and ability have an obligation to those without throughout the year.

This year, as you celebrate with your family and friends remember the real Christmas pageant and think about how you can open your door to the poor, the lame, the blind, the prisoner. It may just be the best Christmas pageant yet!

Amen