

## “The Light Is Almost Here”

Date: December 17, 2006

Text: Luke 1: 39-55

Several years ago I overheard two junior high students talking about their Christmas trees. Apparently both of them had artificial trees in their homes and one of the teens said: “I smelled a REAL tree once.” To me that conversation points to a great dilemma: How can we get beyond and beneath the artificiality of Christmas and once again discover its REAL meaning? How can the figures in the story become more than part of a paper mache crèche? Let’s start with Mary, not the idolized statue but a REAL woman, a mother. What will it be like for her to be a parent just as many of us are parents and grandparents?

Three times in our morning lesson Mary is called “blessed” and those who have had children know the feeling. There was a joy and excitement as these two pregnant women got together, just as there would be in our times. Surely Mary and Elizabeth talked about the child kicking in the womb, the feeling of growth within. Later they would compare notes on the delivery and what it was like to hold their baby for the first time. I have been struck so many times when visiting a home after a child has been born with the tremendous feeling of warmth and joy that pervades that household. What a glow comes over the worship center when a baby is presented to the congregation in baptism.

Every birth is a gift from God and cause for rejoicing but in that manger in Bethlehem something more happened. As the poet says, “Love came down at Christmas. Love all lovely, love divine.” This birth was God’s ultimate sign of his love for each and every one of us! Bethlehem transcends individuals; Christmas is for the whole of humanity! God in this event makes known his intention to be our God and to stick with us no matter what.

Mary’s blessing is our blessing because of what God has done in this birth in a manger long ago. There are a lot of crazy things going on in our world but God’s Son is there to guide us through the maze. Some days we aren’t sure that we have the strength to continue but Jesus the Christ is there to offer what we need. One of the most powerful stories I ever have heard about the meaning of Christmas, and one I have shared many times involves a woman who related this experience from her childhood. Her family had lived in two rooms behind a bar. At the age of 6, she happened to come through the curtain separating the bar from the living area just in time to overhear her parents talking about divorce. Her father said to her mother: “I don’t want Jean. Girls are too expensive to bring up. We’ll have to do something else with her.” At age 6, this child discovered that her father didn’t want her and that left a scar deep inside of her. But do you know what she used to tell friends at this time of the year? “Now you see why Christmas means so much to me and always has. It is the assurance that My Heavenly Parent is different than my father. God loves me so much that he came to be with me in the birth of Christ on that first Christmas.”

Truly on December 25<sup>th</sup> we celebrate a “blessed” event.

If Mary is to be a real mother however, we know that the story doesn’t end with a sweet little baby. What’s it like to be a parent as a child grows up? Aren’t there days as parents when we wish our kids could have remained babies? It all seemed easier than when they get to be teenagers or, as some of us know, even older. There are a multitude of joys as the years pass but also an on-going worry and responsibility. It begins with listening for your baby’s breathing in the middle of the night, wondering how she is doing in school, waiting up at night for them to get home and on and on. One of our kids, now an adult, still reminds us that one of his worst memories of his teen years was the night he was late getting home from a date and I went and picked him up from some girl’s porch. Such parental worry doesn’t end just because they are adults and indeed it may be worst because then we only can stand by and hope things will be okay.

Do we ever think of Mary the mother in terms of practical daily living? She certainly shared in all the feelings that we have had if we are parents. Incidentally, it is thought that Joseph died when Jesus was quite young and thus did not share in the growing up process. There were times when Mary didn't understand what Jesus was thinking, occasions when she wished he would just come home and then there was the agony of being at the foot of the cross when her son was crucified at age 32. There is a portion of the Christmas story in Luke that deserves more attention. When they brought Jesus into the temple after his birth, Simeon was there to bless the child but also said to Mary: "a sword will pierce your heart as well." How true that was.

Somehow that sword piercing thought seldom gets into our Christmas celebration. So many pageants are held in churches this time of the year. Batavia is fortunate this year to have lovely Ella Carlson, just recently born, to be "that sweet baby in a manger" for our Christmas Eve service. Sadly for many any consideration of what will happen as the child grows up is put back on the shelf right after December 25<sup>th</sup>, right alongside the ornaments and lights. American Christians generally like to think only of the cute child and not "ponder," what a great word, the rest of the story as Mary was wont to do. It was just the opposite for early Christians. They approached Christmas after experiencing the soul wrenching time watching at Calvary and then the joy and mystery of the empty tomb. Because Christ had given his life as the ultimate sign of God's love, the rest of Jesus' life became important to them. Thus, Easter was the first Christian holiday to be celebrated.

We seldom connect Christmas and Good Friday and Easter in our celebrations but there is a crucial principle involved here: with blessing comes responsibility. We who richly appreciate this divine gift are to share the light that Christ brought into the world. Every Christmas Eve when the candles are taken into the darkness a sign is given that Christians will not allow the world to overcome them. Just as parents have responsibilities in the raising of their children, so as Christians we have responsibilities as light-bearers unto the world. That means sharing God's love in what we say and do, supporting people in their need, being there for others, standing against the current trend to think first of one's self. Perhaps just as important it means working to assure a fair shake for everyone even when it seems almost futile.

"I smelled a real Christmas tree once." Think of the REAL Mary, who is "blessed" but who also carries within her heart a deep burden or responsibility. Think, then, of the REAL Christmas: it's a time to count our blessings beginning with God's ultimate gift of love and it's a time to accept the challenge of living each day as a follower of Christ. A poet has written

What will we do with the birth of this baby?  
What will we do with this child who is born?  
How can we keep this new babe in the manger?  
Little and still as that first Christmas morn.

As he grows older he threatens our pleasures  
Threatens our love of the world and its things,  
Threatens our selfishness and independence.  
Care and the cross are the gifts that he brings.

If we make room in our lives for this baby,  
Nothing will ever be the same.  
What will we do with this baby called Jesus?  
We who are Christians and carry his name.