

The 4th Sunday of Advent: Holy Trinity Church: December 24, 2017

Luke 1: 26-38: *“Let It Be with Me According To Your Word.”*

Preached

By

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In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

There was a story in an issue of *Reader’s Digest* not too long ago. It is a brief, true story from a lady named Ann Douglas Vaughan who lives in Newport News, Virginia. Ms. Vaughn writes that when she was ten, she found a wallet. There wasn’t any money in it, but, she says, even at ten years of age she knew how these things worked. She couldn’t wait to return the wallet and get her reward! All day long she called the phone number which she found in the brown leather wallet, but no one answered. Finally, her dad relented and drove her to the owner’s address. Once there, they found a modest military housing unit with a torn screen door. Then her dad did something quite unexpected. As he rang the bell, her dad took three \$20 bills and tucked them into the empty wallet. Ann Douglas Vaughan writes, “Turns out my reward for returning the wallet was getting to see one of life’s true heroes in action.”

She was, of course, referring to her dad. In her eyes her dad was a hero because of his generosity to a stranger who genuinely needed it.

Christmas is a time for generosity. Why? Because the generosity of God was displayed at Christmas: “In the sixth month of Elizabeth’s pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin’s name was Mary. “The angel went to her and said, ‘Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you.’ “Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said to her, ‘Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob’s descendants forever; his kingdom will never end.’”

Today, we celebrate the world’s most important gift. God “gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life . . .” (John 3:16). Gabriel comes to Mary and announces that she will bear a son. But, He is not just any son. “You are to call him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the

throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end."

In other words he will be the Messiah, sent by God to deliver the people. The story makes clear that his coming will be particularly good news to those who are hurting, the sick in mind, body and spirit, the poor and the homeless, the outcast, the marginalized. It is no accident that lowly shepherds are the first to get the message after Mary. It is no accident that Mary's baby was born in a stable, with a cattle trough for a bed.

Some of the finest Christmas celebrations this year will not be in the elegant mansions of Beverly Hills and Palm Springs. They will be in tiny hovels in Latin America, in thatched huts in Central Africa, in the slums of Manila.

Many of the deprived and outcast of this world identify in a special way with the Christ Child who started life in the humblest of conditions.

Everything about his birth affirms God's love for the least and the lowly, even that little town in which he was born. Not in Jerusalem or Rome, but in Bethlehem. Bethlehem was no teeming metropolis. Nevertheless, scripture prophesied that it was the city of David and it was there that the Messiah was to be born. Then there was that humble couple having their child born in a stable and the shepherds and the cattle and the bed of straw. How absolutely

astonishing it would have been to that humble first family of our faith huddled in that crude stable if they realized that the birth of their child would become an excuse for a garish display of materialistic indulgence in our world today.

Dismiss it as silly sentimentalism, if you will. But in our world where billionaires live lives that would have made Solomon in all his glory envious, in our world dominated by the pursuit of pleasure and the almighty dollar, we need the reminder of the Christmas story that the truly important things in life bear no price tags. Love for God and love for one's neighbor is all that matters in the story of the first Christmas. Everything else decays and dies but these alone are eternal. Christmas is a time for generosity.

My sisters and brothers, I hope that the gift of God's Son is also a reminder to us that the greatest gifts are not material. It is never the size of the gift that matters, but the love behind the gift. Sometimes, simply the act of showing someone that they matter is sufficient.

There is a story by an unknown author that says it beautifully. It is titled, "A Baby's Hug." Perhaps you've seen it on the Internet. After a busy morning of activity a family decided to stop for lunch at a restaurant. Erik's mother placed him in his highchair. Suddenly, Erik squealed with glee and said, "Hi," giggling and chuckling as he looked across the restaurant. His mother

followed the direction of Erik's eyes to learn what had amused her son so. Her eyes met a homeless-looking, unkempt old man just across from their table. With his hands waving at Erik, the man said "Hello baby! You are such a big boy." Erik's parents were startled. They didn't quite know how to respond to this situation. Erik didn't seem to care that others in the restaurant were now staring at him and the old man. Erik's parents hurried their meal as soon as it arrived. The old man was still teasing at Erik: "Peek-a-boo, I see you." The man was anything but cute and obviously intoxicated, but Erik didn't care. No sooner had they finished their meal than Erik's dad hurriedly went to pay the check. He told his wife to meet him in the parking lot. The old man sat poised between the mother and the door. "Lord, just let me out of here before he speaks to me or Erik," she prayed. As she drew closer to the man, Erik's mother turned her back trying to sidestep the man and avoid any air he might be breathing. As she did, Erik leaned over her arm, reaching with both arms in a baby's "pick-me-up" position. Before the mom could stop him, Erik had propelled himself from her arms to the old man's. Suddenly the ragged man with sorry old shoes and a young child with a face full of giggles were in full embrace.

The baby, in an act of total trust and love, laid his tiny head upon the man's ragged shoulder. The man's eyes closed, and tears hovered beneath his lashes. His aged hands, full of grime and pain, cradled the baby and stroked his back.

Erik's mother stood awestruck. The old man rocked and cradled Erik in his arms and he looked at the mother and said, "You take care of this baby."

Somehow, she managed to say, "I will." He handed Erik back to her and said "God bless you, ma'am; you've given me my Christmas gift." She could say nothing more than mutter, thanks. With Erik in her arms she ran to the car, crying "My God, my God, forgive me." That day, the mother and the patrons at the diner had witnessed God's love made known through the innocence of a tiny child.

My dear sisters and brothers in Christ, this is the charm of Christmas, a day like no other. Christmas is a time for generosity. Why? God gave us the most generous gift possible, the gift of His son. The most important gifts are never material. They are but symbolic of our love for those to whom we give them. And that includes giving to the least and lowest, as God did when He gave His Son for us. AMEN.

