

## LEAPING IN THE WOMB

Luke 1: 39-45

December 20, 2009 – The Fourth Sunday of Advent

University Church of Chicago

Eugene H. Winkler, Pastor

Several years ago I read a review in the *New York Times* of a book, *The Ice Harvest*, by Scott Phillips. The review was favorable, the reviewer thought Mr. Phillips moved past stereotypical, pasteboard characters and explored the terrain of Wichita, Kansas, where the novel was set. I have some friends from Wichita who have lived in the Chicago area for a number of years, I like Wichita, and so I bought the book as a gift for my Kansas friends.

Big mistake.

The story is not a nice one, not one good Methodist folks from Wichita could relate to. *The Ice Harvest* takes place on Christmas Eve, 1979. The protagonist of the novel is an attorney named Charlie Arglist. He is the local *consigliere* for the Mob, and he has a number of scores to settle before he flees town with a huge amount of cash he has stolen from the Outfit. The story takes place in a variety of strip joints, nightclubs, honky tonks, three different beleaguered homes and is rife with profanity, promiscuity and drunkenness. My friends were dismayed that I would even suggest such a book for them, much less buy it as a gift.

After reading the novel, I've thought a good deal about its people, their situations and the hopelessness that pervades their existence on what is a typical Christmas Eve for a lot of people in North America. You and I don't hang around very much with folks like Charlie Arglist and his friends—people who will have nowhere to go on Christmas, people estranged from former spouses and children, people who will drink too much, who will have no vivid memory of what Christmas means.

"God is love," the Bible tells us, and that means the revelation is in the relationship. "God is love" does not clear up all the mysteries; it provides an even greater mystery. "God is love" is not a truth we can master; it is only one to which we can surrender. We want God to come in visions and powerful images and unusual circumstances, even miracles. But the perfect self-expression of the Holy comes to us in human form.

And that theological truth points to Charlie Arglist's problem with Christmas. It's our culture's problem with Christmas, the church's issue. We want the sweetness and light, the angels and the shepherds and the magi in isolation from Christ's life and death. But we have to remember

that the Gospel writers wrote their story from the Passion backward. They knew how the story ends. It was the ending that enabled them to make sense of the beginning.

Years ago, in a central European town, the older townspeople could be seen making the sign of the cross as they passed by a certain ordinary-looking wall. When a visitor asked why they were doing that, nobody knew. The visitor's curiosity led him to begin chipping away at the layers of whitewash and dirt covering the wall until underneath he discovered a beautiful mural of Mary and the child Jesus. Generations before, the townspeople had had a reason for making the sign of the cross as they passed the mural, but succeeding generations had only learned the ritual. They continued to go through the motions without knowing the reason.

The story of Mary and Elizabeth cries out in wildness and absurdity. This encounter between the two women—one unwed and scarcely old enough to bear a child and the other long past child-bearing age—is foolish, dangerous, amazing and joyful. This upside down world about to be inaugurated by the incarnation of Jesus brings us to a week not of serious theological reflection but of subversive laughter and astonishment.

The scene that Luke paints is absurd. The coming of the Messiah who will redeem Israel is anticipated and proclaimed not by archangels or high priests or emperors or even preachers. Rather, two marginalized women meet in the hill country of Judea to commiserate and celebrate their miraculous pregnancies. Blessings are shared. Songs are sung. Astonishment is expressed. And a baby leaps in the womb of Elizabeth—a baby that will be born as John who will become known as the Baptist. These two peasant women carry the future and proclaim the Messiah, God's chosen One.

In a marvelous book, *Carnival and Other Christian Festivals: Folk Theology and Folk Performance*, Max Harris writes of how Mary's song inspired the Feast of Fools, a name variously given to all or part of the Christian revels that were celebrated for centuries throughout the church. The Feast of Fools, in fact, became a literal acting out of the Magnificat as a witness to the God "whose inclination is to topple human power structures and to raise the downtrodden to a position of honor and feasting."

In the waiting and anticipation of Advent, perhaps we need to pay attention to that aspect of this story. Instead of being so deadly serious about the season, we can learn from the Feast of Fools which subverted the pretensions of the hierarchy of church and society. In medieval and early modern Europe, Christmas was a time for festive reversals of status. For example, on December 28, Holy Innocents Day, 1685, in the Franciscan church of Antibes, lay brothers and servants "put on the vestments inside out, held the books upside down...wore spectacles with rounds of orange peel instead of glasses...blew the ashes from the censers on each other's face and hands, and instead of the proper liturgy chanted confused and inarticulate gibberish."

Maybe the best way for us to prepare for the Incarnation is to lampoon the “powers that be.”

Everyone who wills it can be a good person, said Kierkegaard, but to be bad always takes talent. This is why many a person prefers to be a philosopher, not a Christian, because to be a philosopher takes talent. It takes humility to be a Christian. In modern drama, Kierkegaard said, the bad is always represented by the most brilliantly gifted characters, whereas the good, the upright is represented by the bag boy in the grocery store.

What makes it so maddening is that while we want God to be God, God wants to be human. We want God to be strong, so that we can weak. But God wants to be weak so that we can be strong. We want God to prove herself. But she answers: “Do you want proof or freedom?”

Did Mary come to Elizabeth’s home seeking proof, confirmation of her divine pregnancy, encouragement to continue believing God? Or should the word of Gabriel have been enough? When Gabriel declared that “with God nothing will be impossible,” Mary had responded, “let it be to me according to your word” (Luke 1:38). But we modern folks know about doubt, don’t we? So it’s easy for us to imagine that she might have had second thoughts and doubts. Even John Calvin concedes as much in his commentary on this story:

“There is nothing we should reckon odd in her seeking to confirm her faith by going to see the miracle which the angel had effectively brought to notice. The faithful may be satisfied with the unadorned Word of God, and yet neglect none of God’s work which they realize provide support for their faith. Mary was above all right to seize upon the help afforded her if she did not wish to reject what the Lord had deliberately put before her.”

When I was in Thailand several years ago, I bought a silk tie at Jim Thompson’s shop (not named for our state’s former Governor—he’s rich but he’s not famous in Thailand like the former CIA agent/silk merchant by the same name). It’s a beautiful tie with many elephants woven into its design. I wore it to a hearing at the State of Illinois building a couple of years ago, and one of my Democratic friends was outraged. “How could you wear such a tie with all those Republican elephants all over it?” I tried to explain that this tie had nothing to do with American party politics, but she wouldn’t listen. So, she had Ben Silver send me his catalogue, in which was a tie with donkeys on it.

I’ve been intrigued with Ben Silver for a long time. He runs a discreet, somewhat shabby shop in Charleston, South Carolina, where he overcharges the tourists but he makes a lot more money from the Ben Silver Collection. You can purchase blazer buttons or cuff links with the crest of hundreds of colleges or universities. Or ties with your school color or crest.

But what about those of us who never went to college? Well, Mr. Silver has figured out that market too. You can buy buttons that have a crest reading *Colegium Pulsationum Durarum* (College of Hard Knocks) with the seal in the form of a pick and shovel against an industrial construction site. The perfect gift, says the catalogue, for “the self-made individual.”

The only problem is that there is no such thing as a self-made individual. We are who we are by the grace of God, because of the gifts we have received in patience and love and forgiveness from others, because of their kindness. As Blanche DuBois says in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, we have “depended on the kindness of strangers.”

When you open your gifts this Christmas, take a moment to remember those gifts that have already been opened in your life: someone who loves you unconditionally; the way God keeps interrupting your faith-journey and turning you back, putting your feet, as the Fortieth Psalm says, on the rock; and the mystery we celebrate at Christmas—that God has become one of us, fully divine and fully human at the same time—a secret, as John Calvin said of the Lord’s Supper, “too lofty for either my mind to comprehend or my words to declare.”

Do you know that White Castle café at the corner of Roosevelt and Canal on the near South Side? It’s like Edward Hopper’s painting, *Night Hawks*, filled all night with city workers, laborers, Metra workers, prostitutes, wanderers. I remember being in there late one night (or early one morning) when a big, hulking waiter in a dirty T-shirt came up and said to a man down the counter, “What’s yours, Mac?” The man replied, “Give me two eggs, scrambled. And a few kind words.” The waiter clomped off and in a few minutes returned. He slammed the plate carelessly in front of the customer. As he turned away, the man asked, “Wait a minute. What about some kind words?” The waiter looked at him, looked at the plate and replied, “Oh, yeah, sure. Don’t eat dem eggs.”

Goodness knows, you and I need some kind words. But more than that we need words that begin to probe beneath life’s surfaces into the depths, words that don’t leave us gliding along life’s smooth, shiny surface, words like those of Elizabeth and Mary that bring us back to the central truth of the Christian faith. Flannery O’Connor, that wonderful Catholic Christian from Milledgeville, Georgia, one of our greatest storytellers, declared, “You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you odd.” That’s the message on this Fourth Sunday of Advent that cuts across all our pretenses and logic. It’s odd but it’s God’s truth.