

December 14, 2008  
Third Sunday in Advent  
Luke 1:39-55

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*Send Me Away Empty*

This may sound strange, but I think this might just be the best Christmas ever. Here's why: the economy has tanked, we don't have money for gifts, some people are living on the edge while others are desperately trying to step back from the precipice; this Christmas is not going to be like past ones. Some family members may not be able to travel—don't get me wrong, I'm not suggesting that's necessarily a relief, though in some cases it might be. Many people are not traveling because they just can't afford the airfare or the gas, even at today's prices. The very fact that things are dire is good preparation for Christ's birth. If you think back to the first Christmas, things were much the same. Caesar Augustus ruled with an iron hand, taxes were milked from those who had nothing and people were forced into conscription and registration no matter that they were lame or with child. There wasn't a lot of frivolity around.

In years past some of us have had a tendency to get overly serious and earnest about the material focus of the holiday season; we have vowed to cut back on our purchases and some of us rarely succeeded in any substantive fashion. This year may be different; not spending isn't an option but a necessity. But we also tend, I think, to beat ourselves up for giving in to the pressure, no matter to what extent we do so. With the financial situation what it is, we feel bad shopping and feel bad not shopping for our kids, our siblings, our grandchildren. So on top of everything else we have to tote around these days, we are now lacing our cups with a generous measure of guilt. Guilt that we're buying too much, guilt that we can't buy enough. Guilt that we seem to be succumbing to some pressure outside ourselves. Guilt that we're indulging too much, exercising too little, not feeling the spirit of the season; guilt that we do in fact feel the spirit when we should be worrying about our very futures; guilt that we feel, on occasion, sorry for

ourselves. Phew! As human beings, we seem to have a terminal preponderance for being serious and somber and guilty.

Holidays are not serious. Holidays are *holy* days. And if we look at the root of the Hebrew word for holy, we see that it means “otherness,” “differentness,” “apartness.” These days are set apart precisely because they are different, they are times when their very oddness is to be embraced and celebrated. How we acknowledge this strangeness, this holiness, this holy day, has a lot to do with the stuff, the matter of creation. When we act superior about the stuff that surrounds us, we do God no justice. God cares a lot about the real, tangible matter of the world. And while we may think, a good deal of the time, that God is serious, I think that God is mostly important and not always serious. One of my favorite examples is a moose; no one without a good sense of humor could have created a moose. God delights in the creation, strange and peculiar and odd though it may be. It has been touched by God and is, therefore, holy other. As the Episcopal priest Robert Farrar Capon wrote in a wonderful essay some years ago:

“Matter is one of God’s brightest ideas; and if God gets an idea, it has a bark to it. When God thinks up a duck, for example, you don’t get the thought of a duck, or a plan for a duck, or an archetype of a duck; by George, you get a duck! God is the biggest materialist there is: (God) invented stuff. God has more of it than anybody else and likes it even better than we do. We may natter on about the ‘materialism’ of the holiday season, but what’s wrong is that we’re so full of spiritual hot air about ‘values’ and ‘meaning’ that we never get around to the marvel of matter itself.” (*Eating Well*. November/December 1994. 49)

Snow is a great example of something strange and odd and wonderful. But we delight in it when we can control it, plow it, shovel it, ski on it, drive on it, when it doesn’t get the better of us. We’re so busy figuring out what it might mean to our day, that we sometimes don’t see it for its absurd, magnificent beauty. As Gerard Manley Hopkins wrote:

*Glory be to God for dappled things--  
For skies of couple-colour as a brinded cow;*

*For rose-moles all in stipple upon trout that swim;  
Fresh-firecoal chestnut-fall; finches' wings;  
Landscape platted and pieced—fold, fallow, and plough;  
And all trades, their gear and tackle trim.  
All things counter, original, spare, strange;  
Whatever is fickle, freckled (who knows how?)  
With swift, slow; sweet, sour; adazzle, dim;  
He father-forth whose beauty is past change;  
Praise him.*

Our lives are dappled now and then, by things that don't go right. I suspect that there is a part in all of us that wants Christmas to be perfect, or at least the best we can make it under the circumstances, and for some the circumstances are truly appalling. And along the way, struggling to make things better, struggling to fashion from chards of a life a vase fit for a king, some of us just about do ourselves in. By trying to erase all the dapples, to fill in the holes and smooth over the lumps, to make the sad child happy, to stretch the dwindling dollar, to deal appropriately with the empty seat at the table, to cast a light on sadness, by trying so hard, we inadvertently shut God out.

In her beautiful song, the Magnificat, Mary says, "God has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty." (Lk 1:53) At first this might appear to be yet another dismissal of the rich and a rewarding of the poor, but it bears another look. Sometimes I think of my life as a bowl. When it is full to overflowing, as it is so much of the time, there simply isn't room for God. But when I feel hollowed out, when the fill line is lowered, when what I see mostly are the lumps, sharp edges and imperfections in myself and in my life, when I hunger, yearn and, yes, ache and mourn, then there is space in my heart for God's healing grace. You know what it's like to eat a meal when you're *really* famished. Sheer heaven. In comparison, food on stomach only moderately hungry is fine but not great. Perhaps the greatest gift that God could give those whose cups are full is to hollow them out a bit, let them know the promise of yearning, send them away

empty. In order to be filled with God's love, to be filled with good things, we must first make space in our lives, in our hearts.

This is what Advent is about, making room for Jesus. Our hearts and hearths won't be ready if we polish away all the dapples and disregard the odd and strange and holy peculiar things that surround us. The goal, I think, is yearning and there is a long and rich spiritual tradition, which is founded on understanding this palpable, concrete desire for God. If everything in our lives and in the world were perfect we would not have needed Jesus. It is precisely because all is not right that God came among us and is born in our hearts again and again. As Christmas draws near and in one way or another you feel fried, or hurt or lonely or frightened of what the future may bring, hold on to that shaking, frantic, sad, distraught sense and know that your yearning is the highway for your God. The holes in your heart are holy, for it is through them that the Holy Spirit, the breath of God will move. Be open and then be ready to rejoice and celebrate God's love.

When Mary went to visit Elizabeth upon hearing that she too was pregnant, the baby in Elizabeth's womb, "leaped for joy." When did you last leap for joy? For many it may have been a quite a while since you were able to crawl out from under all that burdens you and leap for joy in sheer wonder and awe.

It's not an easy thing to do when hearts are heavy, to find joy, to find the pizzazz to leap. But I think that we can take a clue from God, we can get our hands wet and dirty in the stuff of creation. We can celebrate the holy days as they were meant to be celebrated. We can share meals together, their planning and preparation and presentation. And we can feast, no matter how humble the repast, on the bounty of God's gift to us. But the important thing is to do it with others, to chop the garlic, peel the potatoes, stir the soup, make the cookies and the gingerbread house, light the candles, read the stories and pray *together*. It's one thing to think about Christmas by yourself and quite another to experience with someone else the elemental, holy and majestic importance of Jesus' birth. Play in the snow, sing to the moon, make a snowman, sled, ski, delight in reading a book by the fire.

When God decided to go all out for us, to fill our cups with love, we were not sent the idea of a Christ or the plan of a Christ or a fax of a Christ, virtual Christ or the promise of redemption, we were sent a real person.

Chances are that there have been times in your lives when no platitude consoled, no wisdom offered comfort, no words for all their power sufficed to soothe your broken heart. But then did someone come to you? Did someone take your hand or sit beside you or lay a soft hand on your cheek? You probably don't remember what that person said so much as you remember his or her being there. It costs nothing to be a friend. You are the greatest Christmas present other people could ever get, you, a real person being present and loving and real.

Maybe that's part of what God was trying to show us on that first Christmas, that first Holy Day when things weren't right in the world and apprehension blanketed Bethlehem. People were frightened and their hearts were full of holes and God said, Yeah, maybe now they are open enough for me. So into dappled hearts the love of God blew in on the wings of promise and in the form of an ordinary person. To know this is to be ready for Christmas, to be ready to welcome God.

So let's rejoice on this coming holy day, by making room, by greeting God with thanksgiving, by seeing if we can manage a little leap for joy at the sound of Jesus' coming. May you raise your bowls of blessing amid a feast of good things, of holy gifts—strange swift, slow, sweet, sour; adazzle, dim, in all the freckled oddness of your lives, may Christ enter in.

Amen.