

December 21, 2014

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

"Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God"

Here we go again listening to the same familiar story. Who doesn't know how it is going to come out? The plot doesn't change from year to year. Every shepherd is in place; the star is shining on cue.

No matter how predictable, we keep listening. We lean forward with anticipation, for somehow, despite the oh so familiar details, I believe that in many ways we feel that this story is very much a part of us. What if the angel's message to Mary (the Lord is with you) is God's message to us?

If we want to find ourselves in this ancient but life giving tale, we need to look at the one who received this word of assurance: Mary. For in her we see the one Karl Barth, the famous Swiss theologian called, "the figure that is raised above all the figures of Advent."

In John the Baptist , we may see our need to prepare the way of the Lord, but in Mary we see the even greater need to prepare Him room.

In her, we see the response of faith.

Growing up in the Anglican tradition, Mary the mother of our Lord

Jesus did not really feature as a main character in the Christmas pageant. In fact my sister Lizzie was once selected to play Mary and she was not impressed one bit.

There is a long standing problem that faces us as we seek to focus on Mary, who is called blessed. For within the different denominations of the Church, Mary has been either highly venerated or, reacting against that veneration, she has been ignored.

In either case, a beautifully human witness to the coming of God in Christ has been missed. For if you want to render someone ineffective and powerless, place her (or him) on a pedestal.

If you put any human being on a pedestal it will evoke the strongest of reactions of one kind or another. Long before I had heard anything

of such truth, I observed some strange things through the eyes of childhood and the window of a 1955 British Austin A55.

Every time we journeyed to see my grandparents, we passed a store in a town called Sudbury that contained a number of Catholic people. We had one Catholic person in our school, but we never knew exactly who it was. They were in the great minority and were not very well regarded.

In Sudbury, there was even a Catholic Church..... and outside that

church was there was a large stone niche with a statue of Mary carved out of it. She seemed so silent, pure and flawless. Every Sunday on the way home from church, I would see a string of small signs shaped like the then familiar Burma Shave signs. Instead of the punch line on the last sign it said something like, "Mary, pray for us now and in the hour of our death." When I asked about such things, I was told simply, "Catholic superstition."

But for all our Protestant rejection of such notions, we are indebted to the Roman Catholic Church for keeping alive the singular place of

Mary in the "gospel," the good story. For she has much to say to us now as we are poised between belief and unbelief.

Mary gives us a picture of faith that is a response to God's grace. As Peter Taylor Forsyth, a renowned Scottish Theologian, reminds us, "Faith is not something we possess, but something that possesses us." Faith is an obedient response to God showing Himself in our lives.

As evidenced by the beautiful shrine at the back of our church here at Trfnity, we , that is Anglicans on both sides of the Pond, have gradually become appreciative of the importance of Mary as the mother of the Christ child. This appreciation has grown steadily over the years.

In 1990, we had recently called a new Rector at Emmanuel Church in La Grange. On his very first Christmas he was intent on putting on a lavish children's Christmas pageant. Preparations began months ahead of time, costumes were made and there was no shortage of volunteers.

At that time, Mary was seen as the star performer and the mother of the child selected was overjoyed, for weeks telling everyone she met to come and see her daughter as Mary.

The new Rector then decided to rent a live donkey for the procession. The image was of a pristine creature being led down the aisle by the young man playing Joseph, with Mary sitting sidesaddle on the donkey's back.

Everyone without exception was really excited as the day for the pageant approached. At the rehearsal the kids looked terrific; our 11 year old Michelle was cast as an angel and nine year old Dave was a shepherd.....wonderful.

In Jesus Christ, we experience God as loving and giving; that is grace. Grace is God's love and care in action. This love is not superficial and sentimental. Mary learns that this is tough love that shows itself in a cry of pure pain in a birth and later at the crucifixion, the jagged pain of a piercing loss. "You shall call his name Jesus."

It is a virgin birth, just as faith is always a virgin birth. Trusting in God to deliver you from ultimate despair, discouragement and defeat does not come from the faith of your parents, or from a friend. They may prepare the way for faith but they cannot create faith in us.

Faith comes only as we discover for ourselves that we have been favored, chosen, and blessed. We begin haltingly, trusting in One who loved, created, accepted us before the foundation of the world.

But as our faith grows and matures, we actually live into a closer relationship with God.

Back at Emmanuel Church all were assembled for the pageant. Superb scenery painted by Deacon Bill that I believe is still used to this day.

We waited outside for the arrival of the donkey the star of the show. The shining star on top of our Christmas tree pageant.

A truck came into the parking lot and it reversed as close to the rear entrance of the church as possible.

Then out walks a bedraggled sad looking donkey. Covered in mud and other unspecified substances, I could smell the poor creature from about ten yards.

We walked the dear animal into the Church...then the problems really started.

Firstly, the young lady playing Mary would not come near the donkey. Mary's mother was immediately complaining to the Rector. Joseph wouldn't touch the rope leading the animal.

The cast was quickly regrouped and proceeded into the church. We then decided, once the children were settled, we would walk the donkey down the aisle.

All went well for the first ten steps and then the donkey did what all donkeys do but I cannot imagine to the same degree. Then the donkey started running back down the aisle and out of the church door.

It literally took a month for the odor to dissipate from the church. Every time I look at a model creche or a picture of the majestic

creatures of the world, all perfectly groomed and patient, I think of our experience all those years ago at Emmanuel.

By the way, the pageant, even in the face of the rather unusual start, proceeded without a hitch. Mary and Joseph did wonderful jobs. Of course the stars of the show were our Michelle and our David, but I am certain every parent felt the same way.

I am certain that our Lord found humor in our misfortunes that day.

...and we learned one more time that life is hardly ever works out exactly the way you plan it.

As the virgin Mary said to the Angel in today's Gospel so we reflected together on our efforts to worship God in the best way we could that Christmas.

Let us also reflect on our own worship here at Trinity this Christmas:

"Here we are, the servants of the Lord; let it be with us according to your word."

..... Amen.