

November 29, 2009

Luke 21:25-36

Interior Decorating

The Advent season invites us to consider sprucing up our inner selves - interior decorating that will go with all our exterior decorations.

The Advent season is a decoration season. In fact, Franklin Church designated Saturday as a decoration day called "Hanging of the Greens".

During Advent we spend a great deal of time decorating - we decorate our shops, streets, homes, trees, sometimes even ourselves with an upbeat mood.

There are two things to remember about these decorations. First, they are temporary.

The tinsel, the trinkets, the lights come down and are stored away until next year. All too often with the dismantling goes the smile, the singing, the joy.

Second, these decorations are exterior decorations - things seen, not unseen; things outside, not inside; things visible, superficial and artificial, not things of the spirit.

The exterior decorations we rely on now to get us in the "Christmas spirit" often do remarkably little to alter the barren landscape of our souls.

Red-nosed reindeer, spray-on snow and stockings on the mantelpiece reveal little about our hearts.

They can contribute to a culture filled with people without insides - all exterior, all appearance, all image.

By contrast, God's exterior always point in a substantive way to an interior reality.

Today's Gospel lesson reminds us that there will be signs "in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth ..." (21:25) - all of creation will reflect the stirrings of its Creator's intentions.

On a simpler level Jesus points to a single fig tree (21:29) which is capable of rightly expressing interior changes.

Deep in its roots and heart, the rising sap of spring brings forth sprouts and fig leaves, decorating the tree with the lush greenery of new life.

The prophet Jeremiah also uses this language of exterior regeneration to symbolize interior changes when he describes the new branch which will "spring up" from King David's line (33:15).

What kind of ornamentation can we choose this season which can decorate our inner as well as our outer "living rooms?"

Four Christmas ornaments we might select to beautify our souls come to us as gifts from the first Christmas family:

- 1) The Gift of Mary - Faith
- 2) The Gift of Joseph - Justice
- 3) The Gift of the Shepherds - Wonder and Joy
- 4) The Gift of the Wise Men - Service

1) In a certain sense there is a fifth gospel - The Gospel According to Mary. Only from Mary could the first editors of the Christmas narrative draw their information.

The greatness and gift of Mary is an unparalleled life of faith.

When the angel called her the "favored one," this is the form God's favor would take - she would soon discover herself repugnant and pregnant, and even more embarrassing, pregnant during her engagement period.

She would be forced to travel on a weary journey during the last month of her pregnancy. She would give birth in a strange place with no family to support her and no midwife to assist her.

For a delivery room she had a stable, and for her baby's first cradle, an "animal trough" manger.

King Herod "favored" the baby Jesus with a death sentence shortly after he was born, so Mary fled to Egypt with Joseph.

The story is known as the slaughter of the innocence.

Then this same son that God "favored" her with ran away back to the temple when he was twelve, and when he was in his 30's was executed as a political criminal.

Mary discovered that finding favor with God is not being given ease and enjoyment, but rather it is being given a great mission in life, and receiving the faith to accomplish it.

2) If we would take Joseph's gift of justice out of the Christmas story, here's how the ending would come out:

When Mary was espoused to Joseph, before they came together, she was found with child of the Holy Spirit.

Joseph, her husband, when he found out her condition, being a man of the law and of high pride, went to the judges as the Deuteronomy code dictated and denounced his betrothed for her betrayal of their marriage contract.

Mary, being a woman and without a voice in the court, could say nothing in her defense about an angelic appearance and a divine mission.

So the judges, as prescribed by the Law of Moses, dragged her to the door of her father's house, and there some of Nazareth's leading citizens stoned her to death.

A "just" person is not the same as a "law-abiding" citizen. "Justice" is not the same thing as "law and order."

Some years ago a politician was seeking election to the highest office in the land. He gave a famous speech which helped him win the election. Here is a brief excerpt of what he said:

"The streets of our country are in turmoil.

The universities are filled with rebelling, rioting students.

Communists are seeking to destroy our country; Russia is threatening us with her might. The republic is in danger from within and without. Without Law and Order, our nation cannot survive.

We shall restore law and order."

If you had voted for this politician running on the law-and-order ticket, you would have voted for Adolph Hitler in 1933.

One of the greatest mistakes going is the notion that just because something is legal it is moral, or that just because something is immoral, it should be illegal.

Joseph broke the religious law in not turning in Mary. What he did was illegal; but what he did was just. Justice is not the same thing as legality.

It is perhaps not too speculative that when Jesus stepped in to intercede for the woman who had committed adultery and was about to be stoned, Jesus remembered that this woman about to be executed might have been his mother - except for the "justice" of his father.

3) Shepherds were fabled storytellers. Out on the Judean hills, they had little else to do but sit around a fire at night and spin yarns.

This story the shepherds announced took a lot of believing. It told of angel appearances: How many of us have seen angels?

It told of a moving star: How many astronomers attest to stars that move? It told of royal astrologers: Isn't astrology today the science of the gullible? It told of a king cradled in a cattle stall.

Clearly the shepherds outdid themselves this time.

This story violates our cool, calculating, computer-like logic.

That is why Christmas is a time to go beyond intellectual curiosity into spiritual curiosity - to say with the poet John Donne "For God's sake hold your tongue, and let me wonder."

This is a season we need to approach with an attitude and atmosphere of wonder, openness, and awe.

Shed your super-sophistication, your skepticism, your coolness, and return to a childlike stance and sense of wonder and mystery.

Coupled with the acceptance of the miraculous, wonderful news of the Messiah's birth, the shepherds suggest the presence of a spirit of joyful celebration at Jesus' birth.

Biblical joy is not a belly-full of ho-ho-hos.

It is more than good will, neighborly kindness and Christmas cookies baked for carolers. Advent joy goes down deep into the very foundations of the Christian faith.

Christianity has forgotten the concept of joy perhaps more consistently than any other aspect of Jesus' life and ministry.

The fiercely devout New England Puritans were once described as people who are going to have a bad time if there is a bad time to be had.

We all know people who could have a bad time in the Bahamas. A party is only as good as its guests.

Perhaps, in part, this is why it was story-telling, stargazing, rough-and-tumble-living shepherds who were among those invited to attend Jesus' first birthday party.

Jesus was perceived as someone who made merry, and his meals were considered a big banquet, very joyful, a foretaste of the joy of the kingdom in its fullness.

4) The Gift of the Wise Men - Service.

The Magi are among the most misplaced and misunderstood characters in Scripture.

We are constantly confused about who they were (kings, mystics, astrologers, counselors?) and what they thought they were doing (on a spying mission for Herod or following a divine summons?).

And in Western Christianity, we combine their epiphany with the same night as Jesus' birth - so that we may combine the celebration of the Messiah's birthday with our own frenzy of gift exchanges.

While the simple shepherds responded with spontaneous open-mouthed wonder and joy at the angel's message and baby's presence, the Magi were more deliberate in their response.

These were educated men - learned in the lore of the numerous expectations surrounding a long awaited Messiah.

They knew that the star they followed was a sign of great hope and promise.

Unlike the impoverished shepherds, the wise men came prepared with some of the most extravagant gifts of their age.

They knew, at least in theory, what they were heading toward as they approached Bethlehem.

And yet, despite their wealth, their knowledge and their positions, the Magi presented themselves humbly on their knees before the Christ child.

They did not attempt to impress others with their presence or their insights - they came simply to worship and to serve.

In service they offered themselves and their gifts as both interior and exterior decorations at that dingy little stable which was Jesus' first nursery.

As servants of the Lord, these strangers traveled long distances both to and from the site of Jesus' birth without demanding anything in return.

(They not only followed the star to Bethlehem but they followed the advice of the angel to depart and return by a different path.)

The Magi served God not as royal message-bearers, but as witnesses to the miraculous event that had taken place.

Page 8

Their extravagant gifts, opulent in sight and smell, served to heighten the human sensibilities to God's presence in that stable and in that child.

The exotic nature of the wise men's very being provided a powerful visual aid to the truth of that child, reminding us that all humanity is called to recognize the miracle of Christ's presence among us.

It is time to journey back to that first Christmas. That is what Advent is all about. Every year at this time we prepare to receive Christmas' meaning and purpose.

The birth of the Christ Child is powerful. The sights and sounds and the remembrance of this child born long ago changes everything.

Amen!

Pastoral Prayer

To a stable long ago and far away, we come, O God.
We bring our gifts of love and devotion, of loyalty
and sacrifice for the service of Christ born for us and
for all humanity.

We come bringing all to Christ and this church.
Some of us are busy about many things and now need
to wait quietly for the one thing needful, Jesus
Christ's own truth and peace.

Some of us have been following the Lord from afar
off and many of us have been wavering and wayward.
All of us need your touch.

We bring to You our failures, the beaten and broken,
the despairing and rejected, and those sick in body
and mind. Do for all in need what you know all must
have to be free, to be true, to know peace, and to
serve you and others in effectiveness and joy; for
your love's sake. (Lord's Prayer)

Before the sermon:

O God we throw wide open the window of our hearts
so that the peace of your presence may pour out in all
four directions, showering its blessing upon all the
earth.

Inflame those hearts that have grown cold; reawaken
within the weary of soul your spirit of joy.
Stir up your breath of freshness and enthusiasm that
slumbers in tired hearts.

May this message flow forth, in your holy and
infinite Name, in the redeeming name of your Son
and in the living presence of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

