

The Sunnybrook Pulpit

Rev. Ross Smillie

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God's New Story

*And Mary sang: "Although I am God's humble servant,
God has noticed me..." - Luke 1:39-56*

The stories of Christmas are stories of surprise, of quite unexpected events happening in the most unusual of ways. An elderly couple named Zechariah and Elizabeth conceive, long after they have given up hope. A virgin mother conceives, long before she had even started to hope. Shepherds receive a band of caroling angels, something they would never have even considered hoping for. And wise men from the East encounter the king they expected, not in a palace, but in a manger.

Each of them had a way they thought their lives were going to work out, an expectation of how they thought their lives would unfold. They knew their story, what had brought them to this point, and they thought the rest of their story would unfold with some continuity with the old. Some of them were resigned to that old story; some of them looked forward to it.

But the stories of Christmas are about how God's story is better than the stories they had for themselves. Each of these characters is invited and compelled and drawn into God's story, and in every case it turned out to be better than they had resigned themselves to, better than they had dared to dream for themselves.

Each of us has some sense of how our story is going, where it has come from and where it is going. Some of us are resigned to the story we tell

ourselves and some of us are excited about it, but in every case, let me suggest, your old story is not the final edition.

“Maybe your old story is one co-dependent relationship after the other and maybe the only reason that’s your story is because that’s what your mom did or that’s what your dad did and it’s all you know. Or maybe you are so much older than people normally are when they realize they are gay and for decades you’ve tried unsuccessfully to be straight not knowing that anything else was possible. Or maybe your old story that you think is fixed in stone is that you aren’t someone who has real faith, or who has anything to give or who is so strong they can’t show any vulnerability.”¹

The good news of Christmas, is that we are not limited to our old stories:

- just as a barren old biddy can still birth something new,
- just as the lowliest of peasant girls can become *theotokos*, mother of God,
- just as squalid shepherds can receive the glory of an concert from the heavenly host,
- just as the wisest of wise men can have their highest hopes for kingship revealed as narrow and small,

so our old stories are, in every case, too narrow and too small. God’s story is, in every case, better and greater and richer than the poor ones we tell ourselves.

Often in the stories we tell ourselves, the parts of ourselves of which we are proud are exalted, and the parts of which we are ashamed are diminished. But in God’s story, as Mary sings, the proud are humbled

¹ from Nadia Bolz Weber, “Pregnant old ladies and other signs that God’s story is better than the one we tell ourselves,” from <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/nadiabolzweber> for December 11, 2012.

and the humble and lowly are brought low, and in God's story for us, I think it is often the same way.

When I was growing up, I expected that one day I would be a professor, an admired teacher and researcher. I was proud of my intellect, but never paid much attention to my emotional and spiritual life. And I went to university, studied science, planned to be a marine biologist.

But God's story for me was better than the one I had for myself, and it involved the humbling of things of which I was proud and the lifting up of things that I held of little account. I got this bizarre call, to become a minister rather than a prof, and a pastor rather than a scientist. Becoming a minister has meant I have had to learn to accompany people in their weakness, and that has meant that I have had to come to terms with my weakness, and to discover that my weakness is my greatest strength. In lifting up the neglected spiritual and the emotional aspects of my personality my life has been richer than I could have imagined.

I once knew a man who was diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis. He was a young man, in his thirties, and had a young family. It was a devastating diagnosis, because MS can be a devastating disease. But what I remember most about him was that he recognized in his illness a blessing. He called it his "third eye." He was able to see things he hadn't been able to see before, he told me, because of his illness. He saw people around him with greater empathy for their struggles. He saw the world around him with greater appreciation for its gifts and beauty. And he saw his own life with greater appreciation and gratitude.

That encounter with his own fragility, his own mortality, made him more appreciative, more affectionate, more grateful. And his life became

richer as a result. I don't think he was exactly grateful for his disease, but he was grateful for that third eye and the blessings that came to him only because of the disease. Although the disease took away much of his ability, in other ways his life was richer because his pride in his own ability had been humbled and the despised parts of himself had been lifted up.

There are people sitting here today who are resigned to an old story. Perhaps you think your life is pretty much over. Perhaps you think it is just the same old, same old now until the day you die.

There are people sitting here today who are excited about the old story you are telling yourself. Perhaps you think you have it all planned out. But let me tell you, it probably won't go the way you plan, and at times you will be devastated that it isn't going according to plan.

What I have to remind myself of, over and over again, that God's story is better than the stories we tell ourselves. Today your spiritual task is, in some small way, to release your tight grip on your own story, so that you can open yourself to the birth of a greater story, a bigger story, a richer story than you can possibly imagine.

Let's invite the holy one to come and transform us and our world now, as we pray together:

An Advent Prayer (VU 13):

O God, our deliverer: You cast down the mighty, and lift up those of no account; Like Elizabeth and Mary, who embraced one another with songs of liberation, may we, pregnant with your Spirit, affirm one another in hope for the world; in the name of Jesus. Amen.