

NOT RUDOLPH

Isa.61.1-4

Luke 1:47-55

Yes, it is true. Last week after we sang Santa Claus is coming to town, someone asked if we could let loose and sing Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer this week. After some thought, I decided we really needed to move on. So I am sorry to disappoint some of you, but we are not going to sing Rudolph.

The Gospel reading this morning rejoices in the movement of God's spirit into Mary. The angel has come. The startling, almost terrifying, certainly dangerous word has been spoken to Mary. I would like to offer a word of encouragement here urging you to see the movie the Nativity Story. Part of the movie's power comes from creating an atmosphere that appropriately surrounds the pregnant Mary and Joseph with danger. As they leave Nazareth, disparaging eyes are cast upon them. Luke's way of telling the story has them journeying back to Bethlehem, the city of David. So they endure tremendous struggle, risk and sacrifice.

But the messenger of God has come and overshadowed Mary. The seed has been planted.

And yes, Mary has been blessed. But she has also been burdened. She has this miraculous secret within her. She went with haste to the hill country to her kinswoman Elizabeth, who is also pregnant in an extraordinary way. She goes with haste and hopes to be with someone who feels something of what she feels, who knows something of her joy and anxiety. So the setting of the Magnificat is just this moment of extraordinary communion between soul sisters.

We believe that in some way this story is our story. The reformation era theologian poet Angelus Silesius wrote this quatrain.

A thousand time in Bethlehem
Christ can be born,
But if he is not born in thee
Thy soul is still forlorn.

The mystery of Christmas then is also the mysterious power of Christ being born in us, the Holy Spirit descending on us, the voice of God saying to you and me—Beloved son—beloved daughter. And when our souls are so stirred, when we find the mystery growing within us, when we know ourselves to be cleansed and claimed and called, then we hasten off, to the hill country to find someone who understands, some sister or brother who knows us, whose eyes pierce, O thank God, our soul.

Now Mary offers the Magnificat. Since, O God, your spirit has come upon me and flows through me, my soul rejoices in you. You have looked upon me—you have seen me and regarded me and lifted me up. Through my being lifted up, I know you are lifting up all Your oppressed, downtrodden people. My soul rejoices O my God. And I know too that You are also then putting down the mighty from their thrones. How can I help? You are coming to dwell among us full of grace and truth and to fill our hurting and hungry souls. You O God are going to do battle with those who use religion to oppress others. Hallelujah.

Now let's turn to the Isaiah passage. Remember this passage's place in the life of Jesus. He comes back to Nazareth, after the searing experience of baptism and the identity crisis of the wilderness. And at Nazareth, he reads these words from Isaiah.

The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good tidings to the afflicted, to preach good news to the poor. So this movement of power and transformation that is celebrating in Isaiah is coming to reality through the Incarnation and Mary's song of hope and redemption. Jesus, at Nazareth, and then will embody this hope; he will live it out on the hillsides of Galilee and as he journeys to Jerusalem sealing the promise with his life and his life's blood.

We know that Jesus has gone on before us, he is preparing the way for us and we will follow him.

So we can hear this passage from Isaiah as about Jesus certainly. But it too is about us. This is Jesus story—but his story is our story.

Jesus has been anointed to bring good news to the afflicted. That means us. We are the afflicted, the brokenhearted, and the blind and imprisoned ones. Now, we don't usually think of ourselves that way—or if we do we say "I need a drink, or a vacation or a therapist or a new job or something." We don't want to be that way. We have a refrigerator magnet with a Madeleine Engelbright figure---a woman looks out on the reader, stamping her foot, she says—Snap out of it.

Spiritually, though, the Scripture calls us to acknowledge our need, our emptiness, our brokenness and our temptations to break others.

Acknowledge our need without getting stuck. That is the challenge. In a blessed book of meditations, called *The Inner Voice of Love* Henri Nouwen writes "The question is can you stand erect in your pain, your loneliness, your fears, your experience of being rejected? The danger is that you will be swept off your feet by them. They will be here for a long time, and they will go on tempting you to be drowned in them. But you are called to acknowledge them and feel them while remaining on your foot. ... You have to dare to stand erect in your struggles. The temptation is to complain, to beg, to be overwhelmed and find satisfaction in the pity you evoke....As long as you

remain standing, you can speak freely to others, reach out to them and receive from them.”

The spirit of the Lord is upon Jesus to reach out to the afflicted part of your heart and mind. To acknowledge the reality of our pain—and to offer healing. The Sufis have a saying about Jesus—if he cannot find the pain within you, how will he apply the cure. We are afflicted and the anointed one comes to bring good tidings. Years ago, a mid thirties woman joined the church where I served. She had two cute kids. Sang in the choir. Her husband didn't participate. Her life seemed to be going good until she came and told me that he was abusive. She was seeking a divorce, but there was one complication. They had never legally married. At any rate, it was a painful process, with hours of counseling and phone calls and restraining orders. As things were settling down, she came to talk and to tell me about a dream she had had. In the dream, she was driving down Rt. 22 and came to a shopping center. After parking, she saw a bar and was tempted to go in. There was a strange tent next to the bar. She entered. A Jesus like figure said to her—come in and be healed.

He offers us healing and hope, good news, recovery of our sight, liberation from our prisons. And then He comes to anoint us into the glorious work of our in turn bringing good tidings to the afflicted.

So we look around our church community and we see the powerful work of the Spirit anointing people for their own healing and then for the healing of others and finally for the healing of the world.