

St. Bartholomew's Anglican Church
2368 Eggert Road, Tonawanda, NY 14150

Christmas 1, Sunday, December 26, 2010

Fr. Molison, Preacher

“Christ Was Born For This?”

Good Morning!

Permit me to also, on this the second day of Christmas, to wish you a very Merry Christmas!

Last week Sunday night, this parish was treated to an excellent presentation of the Christmas story involving our youth in a production that very well blended the ancient story with our contemporary culture. Producers and Directors Eileen Arnold and Kathryn Hillestad are to be commended for a job very well done. And the kids were... well... just awesome!

David Davis of Nassau Presbyterian Church in Princeton, NJ, shares a wonderful account of another youth presentation of the Christmas story. Mrs. Smith was only in her first year as the volunteer in charge, and if we are honest, most likely her last. Christmas pageants were made to have rough edges. However, on this particular evening, rough edges ruled.

In retrospect, may be there were a few things she would have done differently. For instance, maybe it was not such a good idea to have all the second and third graders be animals, especially after Billy Mc Cleester asked if they could make animal noises, to which Mrs. Smith replied, “Yes, Billy, that might be very realistic.”

Or maybe someone could have pointed out to Mrs. Smith that it takes a bit of time to dress, fix the hair, and move into position the heavenly host, especially when it is made up of 32 angles who are between two and four years old!

And who would have thought that when working with the fifth grade narrators, Taisha and Jerod, who were very good readers, who would have thought someone needed to go over punctuation with them?

So, let's just say, it was a rough afternoon in Bethlehem. Young Mary had been sick all morning, and the bucket next to the manger was for her to use. And 13-year old Joseph decided ten days ago that he was not going to enjoy this pageant at all.

When the animals arrived behind the shepherds, any hope of having peace vanished! They took over the whole chancel and elevated “lowing” to a new cacophonous, hip hop, rap sounding art form.

The angels? Well, the angel mom and dad, working back stage, completely missed their cue. The angel host arrived long after the wise men, long after the congregation had sung “Angels we have heard on high,” even after narrator Taisha announced four times, “And suddenly, there was with the angel a multitude of heavenly host.” However, when they did arrive, they good very good! Their halos were perfect!

Right near the end, just before everyone was to sing, “Joy to the World,” the narrator Jarod fought his way to center stage for his last line. He stepped on and over an abundance of sheep and cows, even dogs and cats! All while this was happening, sick little Mary was reaching for the bucket. 13-year old disinterested Joseph rolled his eyes to the point one would think they would fall out.

Jarod attempted to shout his last line over the barnyard noise, but he did not get the parents’ attention. So, Jarod put his folder down, stretched out his arms, and with great exasperation, yelled, “Christ was born for this?”

To which Mrs. Smith muttered to herself, “It is an exclamation point; not a question mark.”

We did not observe any of the above “rough edges” in last Sunday’s program. Hopefully, Eileen and Kathryn will return next year.

The narrator’s closing line, “Christ was born for this!” is the last phrase from the second verse to the Christmas carol, “Good Christian men rejoice with heart and soul and voice...” which reads in part, “He hath opened heaven’s door, and we are blest for evermore. Christ was born for this! Christ was born for this!” Exclamation point!

And then again, maybe in Jarod’s mistake, there lies a question we ought to ponder a bit. We look at the world seeking peace, only to see chaos: economical chaos; political chaos; cultural chaos. We also could ask, “Christ was born for this?” We are all familiar with the Christmas story, Mary and Joseph, the angels, the shepherds and the magi, and how they leave us all warm and fuzzy. But, do a reality check, dig beneath the warm and fuzzies, and we uncover something entirely different. And this then begs the question, “How does Christmas really work?”

I did not know this, but apparently there is a web site called, “How Christmas Works” set up by author Brian Marshall. This web site supposedly is a one-stop site for all your questions about Christmas, such as: “Why do people give presents on Christmas?; What does Mistletoe have to do with Christmas?; or “What is the real meaning behind the carol, “The twelve Days of Christmas?”

Marshall writes that the answers to these questions reveal cultural events that take years to become traditions. However, in a sense the above traditions only really help to “put on” Christmas; help us “to do Christmas right.” But how does Christmas work? Really work?

Actually, Christmas almost didn’t happen. Take a close look at both Matthew and Luke’s gospels and you will discover and possibly be stunned by the danger and death that permeate the Christmas story as recorded in the scriptures.

For one thing, you don’t take your pregnant wife – much less pregnant with God – put her on a mule and pack her off on a 60+ mile road trip. Second, if you do, you arrange for lodging and don’t just hope that there is room at the inn. As Barbie and I have personally observed, you would be surprised at the number of families that do just that and panic when they have no place for the family to sleep that night. Third, the child is born in a manger; a cattle feeding trough! A very sterile environment, wouldn’t you say? Your typical birthing center?

And then the havoc the three kings made when they ran smack into King Herod with the announcement that another king has been born. We all know what followed – the slaughter of the innocents. So Christmas almost didn’t come off, and would not have if it weren’t for the intervention of God who said it would be. Sadly, Christmas doesn’t come off for many now. Oh, yes, there are the Christmas cards, the shopping, the food, the gifts, and so on. But is that really Christmas? No, these activities represent holidays. They are not Christmas. So then, how does Christmas work?

You may be surprised at the answer. It is a dangerous business when we remember Christmas, because it evokes, it stirs up dreams and hopes. Christmas is not easy, and in fact, it can be costly, because it demands that we put the “hopes and fears of all the years” to work. This is not easy, but if we do it, then Christmas works. When we honor Christ, and not the culture, honor Christ and not the traditions, then Christmas works. We honor Christmas when we allow Jesus to take us out of our comfort zone to lead us into uncharted waters. That is what Christmas is all about: letting Jesus take your hand and lead you along a journey he has chosen for you.

Author Tony Campolo tells the story of a church deacon who wasn’t “deaconing.” He just didn’t do what he was supposed to do as a deacon. One day, this deacon was invited to drive a group of young people to an old folks home for their once a month worship service.

On this first Sunday, the deacon stood in the back, arms folded across his chest. Suddenly, someone was tugging at his arm. He looked down, and there was this old man sitting in a wheel chair. He took hold of this old man’s hand

and the old man held his hand all through the service. The next month, this was repeated. The old man in the wheel chair held the hand of the deacon. This went on for a number of months. Then, one month, the old man was not present for the service. The deacon inquired and was told, "Oh, he is down the hall, right hand side, third door. He is dying. He is unconscious, but if you want to go down and pray, it's alright.

The deacon went to the old man's room. There were tubes and wires hanging all over the place. The deacon took the man's hand and prayed that God would receive this man into His kingdom, that God would bring this man from this life into the next and give him eternal blessings.

When the deacon finished his prayer, he felt the old man's hand weakly squeeze his. The deacon knew that his prayer had been heard. He was so moved that tears rolled down his face. He stumbled out of the room and bumped into a woman. She said to him, "He's been waiting for you. He said that he didn't want to die until he had the chance to hold the hand of Jesus one more time." The deacon was amazed at what he just heard. In a quivering voice, he asked, "What do you mean?" She replied, "Well, my father would tell me that once a month, Jesus came to this place. He would take my hand and he would hold my hand for a whole hour. I don't want to die until I have the chance to hold the hand of Jesus one more time."

In Hank Ketcham's comic strip "Dennis the Menace," Dennis asks his father, "Why can't Christmas ever go into overtime?" It's a good question. It's a great idea! Christmas works when we allow Jesus to take us into unfamiliar territory – a nursing home; a shut-in's home; a neighbor's home; or even something a bit more bizarre, such as an attitude adjustment, a generous spirit, a helping hand. Whatever.

The point is that whenever and wherever we go, we are the hand of Jesus to others, and when that happens, Christmas happens. Christmas works!

On this, the second day of Christmas, "God grant you the light of Christmas, which is faith; the warmth of Christmas, which is love; the radiance of Christmas, which is purity; the righteousness of Christmas, which is justice; the belief in Christmas, which is truth; the all of Christmas, which is Christ." Amen.