

Sunday, December 23, 2012

Advent 4: Carried on a Flood of Reversal – From Insignificant Things

Micah 5:2-5a; Luke 1: 39-55

God does great things through unnoticed people, in insignificant places.

When five year-old Hannah Taylor saw a **homeless man** eating out of a garbage can, she set out to cure the world of homelessness with **hugs and ladybugs** – as Hannah says, ladybugs represent luck and homeless people need good luck. With some help from her parents, she set up *The Ladybug Foundation* and painted **baby food jars** like ladybugs and asked businesses for spare change. In 5 years, Hannah has raised more than half a million dollars!

One morning before school, **Craig Kielburger** was looking for the comics section of the newspaper when he noticed an article about a 12 year-old Pakistani boy who was murdered for speaking out against child labor. Craig was only 12 at the time and didn't even know what child labor was, but soon learned there were **250 million child laborers** in the world! Wanting to put a stop to this, he started *Free the Children* with a group of classmates. Craig is now 23 and *Free the Children* has become the largest organization of **children helping children**, partnering with the United Nations.

Alex's Lemonade Stand grew from a front yard lemonade stand into a national organization for **kids with cancer**. Alexandra "Alex" Scott was diagnosed with cancer two days before her first birthday, but when she turned four, she set up a lemonade stand to **help her doctors** find a cure. Although Alex passed away when she was eight, her campaign lives on. Thousands of children, schools, businesses and organizations hold **annual lemonade stands** to support this charity, which has raised over \$5 million for pediatric cancer research. (Three stories downloaded from: <http://www.kidzworld.com/article/6444-child-founded-charities>)

Here closer to home – *Hope Ornaments* – developed by Lyzzi Elliot from Grayslake when she was ill – to bring hope to patients in hospitals and shelters by giving them Christmas ornaments.

God is most clearly seen through the lives of unnoticed people, in small places, in small beginnings, through insignificant things.

Micah 5: “But you Bethlehem, though you are small among the clans of Judah . . . will come One who will stand and shepherd God’s flock in the strength of Yahweh . . .”

Bethlehem: Its name means *House of Bread, fruitfulness*.

Bethlehem, however, was a town that was “little among the thousands of Judah – literally, ‘small to be,’ that is, ‘too small to be among.’”

Each tribe was divided into its thousands, each thousand having its own separate head.

Places too small to form a thousand by themselves were united with others, to make up the number.

So lowly was Bethlehem that it was not even counted among the possessions of Judah. In the division under Joshua, it was wholly omitted. Bethlehem was never a considerable place.” (cf. <http://bible.cc/micah/5-2.htm>)

This lowly, ordinary, insignificant place God embraced – a place in which we have the opportunity to see God among us.

Do we notice the places our world writes off and deems insignificant?

And then there is Mary.

We discover her in our Gospel text this morning

A teenage girl, pregnant before she was married to Joseph, poor, a person of little or no significance.

A girl lost behind the scenes on any street in any country in the world.

Just like too many young girls in places as far away as Thailand, and as close as Chicago, who are exploited in sweat shops, or enslaved in the sex trade.

Do we notice the people our world does not see, or worse, writes off?

**In developing eyes to notice these persons and places, we come to see God
– and discover that God especially works through the insignificant, the unnoticed.**

**This is a key characteristic of God
– God has always acted in this way!**

Moses – a murderer, outcast, slow of speech, used by God to set God’s people free

Gideon – a fear filled young man used by God to liberate God’s people

David – the runt of the family, a mere shepherd, exalted by God to serve as Israel’s greatest king

An unnamed Israeli girl captured by a Syrian commander and enslaved
– sent Naaman to Elisha to be healed of his leprosy.

Mary and Joseph – unnoticed, living in poverty called to be parents to God

Jesus – what kind of humanity did God
embrace?

A child born in poverty, out of wedlock, in a backwater place in Judea, later to be an illegal immigrant in Egypt,
raised in an out of the way place of Nazareth, a poor rural preacher travelling the countryside and alleys with a
ragtag bunch of disciples.

Or, the presence of God’s kingdom in the world – sprouts from tiny “mustard seeds” in all kind of places.

**It could even be that being a person or place of significance can get in the way of God being God
– in pouring out mercy and grace and peace in our world.**

**And so I ask us:
Are we willing to be such insignificant ones in the hands of God?**

People from insignificant places? Doing insignificant things?

In so doing we might just discover that we are in the middle witnessing the outpouring of God's grace and mercy, God's justice, God's peace in the world!

Look again at Mary – in the midst of her low circumstances, she had an ability to see more clearly, to see God, more so than those more revered:

Luke reveals, that this lowly girl, had a unique comprehension of God, and so she declared, exalting God as the living presence who creates life in the midst of darkness and injustice.

Listen to how this insignificant, lowly one expresses the active presence of God in the world – (God as subject of active verb)

- For he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant
- For the Mighty One has done great things for me – holy is his name
- His mercy extends to those who fear him
- He has performed mighty deeds with his arm
- He has scattered those who are proud
- He has brought down rulers from their thrones
- He has lifted up the humble
- He has filled the hungry with good things
- He has sent the rich away empty
- He has helped his servant Israel
- He remembers to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants forever
- Just as he promised our ancestors

Recently I have been reflecting on what faith is.

In reading Jesus' admonition to his disciples in Matthew 16 regarding his warning to watch out for the yeast of the Pharisees

- and their ensuing discussion about them forgetting to bring bread along on their journey
- Jesus admonishes them with “you of little faith.”

I used to think that meant – “they were unable to believe enough, they were unable to muster up enough faith to believe.”

But I realize that is to miss the point of what Jesus was saying
– “you of little faith” has nothing to do what belief we are able to muster
– **and everything to do with how we see God part of our everyday lives.**

Faith is making space for God in the midst of our ordinary days.

Faith is seeing God in the little things, in the insignificant things.

Faith is making space for God in the midst of our lives
– opening our lives to witnessing God's actions in the world

Faith is not about some supernatural understanding of reality
– rather faith has to do with seeing God in the midst of the ordinary reality.

God is here engaged in our daily lives. – being people of faith is having a worldview, a perspective that sees God as integrated with the natural order of things, the ordinary things of our lives.

Faith is realizing God is with us

- always with us
- especially in the ordinary and insignificant
- that is why I hang out in coffee shops
- it is in such places, if we have eyes to see, that we begin to see and witness the marvelous outworkings of God who is about recreating all of creation!

What does this say about God?

God lives among us, as one who is lowly, as one who is ordinary, as one who is the “least of these.”

God has taken on our humanity, not just to save us, but to embrace us in our insignificance.

What does this call from us?

For us to stop striving to be great

- that is indeed something hard to let go of – the disciples struggled with this
- I know – so have I.

But when we do, when we are open to God’s action in the world, we participate with God in God’s redemptive mission – God invites us to be a conduit of God’s redemptive re-creation in the world.

Here living in the North Shore, some might say, “what good can come out of Nazareth or Nebraska?”

But here within our small Mennonite community, God has used for example, Dale Kempf.

Dale, along with Abbott colleagues “Dan Norbeck and Hing Sham made their joint HIV-AIDS drug discoveries that bolted molecular research forward and helped turn a fatal disease into a chronic, often manageable disease.

They invented a drug, Kaletra, so powerful that early studies suggested AIDS sufferers may one day replace the so-called "AIDS cocktail" of a group of drugs with a couple of Kaletra pills a day, rendering the virus undetectable. Since being approved in 2000, Kaletra is the hottest-selling drug of its kind in the world. Although it's no cure, it does enable HIV-AIDS patients to live comfortably, with fewer side effects.”
(<http://health.groups.yahoo.com/group/NMPprev/message/2347>)

Out of a humble, even insignificant community, out of humble circumstances, God always does something that is huge

- do we see our ministry involvements in this light?
- that is always the way of God!

As ones who are lowly, we participate with God who is integrally part of our world doing a new thing.

- a flood of mercy, a flood of grace
- realizing that God is not far off, but always with us – most people have a hard time seeing God, but we reveal the whereabouts of God.

And so, as we participate revealing God’s presence in the world, we reveal God not by exalting ourselves

- “hey, look at me, I am participating,”

But rather, we exalt God as “lowly participators” – always pointing God out, as John the Baptist did when he declared about Jesus – “He must increase, I must decrease” (John 3)

Our praises, our lives, our words, our deeds, our goings and comings all contribute to making God visible in the world

– so that all might see, be restored, made whole, blessed.

This is the celebration of Christmas, the discovery of Christmas

- making God visible in the world as a rag tag community of humble, and even, insignificant people, so that all creation may be healed, made whole.

So, this Christmas, I urge us to be ordinary – so that we might participate with God’s great work of making peace.

Let’s go out there and be insignificant!