

*Sermon preached at Trinity Memorial Church, Philadelphia; By The Rev. Edward G. Rice; December 20, 2009, 4th Sunday of Advent, Year C; Micah 5:2-5a; Canticle 15; Hebrews 10:5-10; Luke 1:39-45*

I can't read any version of Luke's nativity narrative without reflecting on the sabbatical time I spent in Zimbabwe in 1991. As part of my time there, I worked with an Irish Anglican priest who was the vicar of some thirty-five parishes and mission churches in and around Chinoi, one of the agricultural centers in Zimbabwe. Most mornings we would jump in his pickup truck and head out to the villages, where we would do from three to five services—some on the porches of farm houses, others in partially built parish churches (our parish had financed the building of four of them at about \$3000 each), a number in the classrooms in parish-run schools, and some in actually finished church buildings. We would preach the Gospel, Baptize children and adults, lay hands on the sick, and share the Eucharist. That is where I learned to preach extemporaneously, as I never knew which role I would play until asked to do so in the middle of the service. It was quite an education.

In Chinoi itself, there were two parishes. One was the church that the white farm owners had attended when the country was still Rhodesia, the other the parish of the native African folk. As part of the Revolution that had taken place in the 1970's and 80's, both of those parishes had been integrated but the traditional patterned remained largely in effect. One morning, the vicar asked me to attend the meeting of the Mothers' Union, the Anglican Church's version of our Episcopal Church Women's organization, to tell them about the parish where I was the rector in East Lansing, Michigan, our work in Africa, my sabbatical—the course I was teaching in their seminary and the retreats I was leading with the seminarians—and what I was doing with their vicar.

During the question-and-answer period that followed my presentation, the one thing they wanted to know most about was the election of Barbara Harris to be the first female Bishop in the Anglican Communion. As many of you probably know, since she was a former member of this Diocese, Barbara was not only the first woman elected Bishop, she is also black. The ladies in Chinoi wanted to know what I thought about that and how I felt about working for a woman. I told them I was quite excited about it, had actually been one of the folks who had to assent to her election, and—though I did not work for her, being a member of the Diocese of Michigan and not the Diocese of Massachusetts—that I had worked for other women and found that I had learned something from each of them. At the end of the meeting, the women presented me with a cloth bag full of the pennies they had collected among themselves. Here I was, having traveled to them at the cost of several thousands of dollars, with a camera on my shoulder worth a couple of more thousand dollars, being given thirty-eight cents out of their crushing poverty so—according to them—that I would not get thirsty and my throat dry out as I went about their hot and dusty country preaching the Gospel of Jesus Christ. I am not sure I have ever experienced such grace and generosity, or have ever been so humbled by any gift I have ever received.

But I am telling you this, not particularly because of the way that meeting ended as by how it began. Their meeting began with the women acting out the first part of Luke's Nativity stories, the Annunciation, the announcement to Mary that she would be the mother of the long awaited Messiah.

The play started out with three of the younger women of that group, all dressed in very colorful outfits, satin high-heeled shoes on their feet, shiny scarves on their heads, promenading proudly and arrogantly around their sanctuary prattling to each other about the rumors running through the high society folk of Jerusalem. Rumor had it, they repeated as they strutted, that God was about to finally fulfill the promise of a savior for all humankind, finally going to vindicate Israel, finally going to cast out Rome, the evil colonial empire (read England, read Cecil Rhodes instead of Herod). And of course, if God had any couth at all, any long-toothed wisdom, God would have the Messiah born to one of them—ta, ta, tah.

Over in the corner, dressed in contemptible rags, was the peasant girl Mary, like Cinderella, on her knees scrubbing the chancel floor. As the three princesses strutted by her, they were full of disdain and derision for that nothing of a peasant wretch. Then all of a sudden, as if from the open sky appeared the Angel Gabriel to announce that Mary, that scullery wench, would be the mother of the Messiah. The princesses screeched in horror at the absurdity of God's intention and ran off in disgust.

Mary, after listening carefully, trying to demur given her unworthiness, gently rose from her washerwoman position on the floor. The rags fell off, revealing the soft blues for which she has ever been known as she burst into song.

My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord,  
my spirit rejoices in God my Savior; \*  
for he has looked with favor on his lowly servant.  
From this day all generations will call me blessed: \*  
the Almighty has done great things for me,  
and holy is his Name.  
He has mercy on those who fear him \*  
in every generation.  
He has shown the strength of his arm, \*  
he has scattered the proud in their conceit.  
He has cast down the mighty from their thrones, \*  
and has lifted up the lowly.  
He has filled the hungry with good things, \*  
and the rich he has sent away empty.  
He has come to the help of his servant Israel, \*

for he has remembered his promise of mercy,  
The promise he made to our fathers, \*  
to Abraham and his children for ever.

From the beginning of the agricultural revolution, when it became possible for some folks to gather more resources than others, from the time that those who did so hired warriors to protect what they had gathered, and accumulated unto themselves wealth and power, the question raised in circles of the wise and thoughtful was, “Can the great be good, or will they use their riches and power to make the lives of the lowly worse?”

And what about God, the greatest one of all. If there is a God—and we continue to ask the same question today—if there is a God, is that God good? If my life is so hard, if my loved ones suffer, if the rich and powerful can continue to exploit the poor and lowly unmercifully, how can God be seen as great and good?

Luke’s Nativity story answers those questions with a resound shout of yes! Yes! Yes. There is a God, that God sees where goodness truly rests, often among the poor and powerless, and that goodness is honored and held up for all the world to see. God is good. God is good, very good, and therefore God is truly great.

But those poor women of color saw more than just the goodness of God, they saw that they could be partners in God’s goodness by they themselves doing good—that is what those pennies were about for them.

They had learned from the section of the nativity narratives which we read today, that in the midst of a world that does not honor or much respect goodness, by coming together those who believe in God’s greatness and God’s goodness can find community and connection, for it is in community and in connection that we can maintain our fragile faith in a God who is great and a God who is good, enabling ourselves to persist in working for goodness against all odds. In the Name of Jesus Christ Our Lord. Amen.