



The Rev. Alan Sutherland, Rector

December 21, 2008

Advent 4B

By Rev. Donna Barr

One of the best things about our daughter's move to Connecticut has been the opportunity to visit New York City, an hour train ride away from her home. There are so many things to see and do but I am always drawn back to my favorite place. If you have ever had the good fortune to visit St. Patrick's Cathedral, you can surely appreciate its beauty and splendor. The largest Roman Catholic Church in America stands magnificently on Fifth Ave. Its Gothic presence is adorned by tapestry, wall hangings, art work, wood, marble, stained glass, brass, bronze and silver. While I do appreciate these aesthetic accomplishments, what draws me to visit over and over again are the glorious statues of our saints.

Flanked on both sides of its nave are small prayer chapels dedicated to various saints. Visitors light candles and pray before St. Jude and St. Anthony and others. In the back of the cathedral behind the grand altar is the chapel dedicated to Mary. On one of my visits, I couldn't help but pause as there was a noticeable difference in this chapel. All the other saints had small bouquets of flowers placed before them, but not hers. Before Mary, lay hundreds of bouquets of fresh flowers.

This image has stayed with me as I have thought about this beloved mother; how she is so revered and honored. She is to be honored indeed.....The mother of our Lord. But I address her as mother because I suppose that is how I connect to her; why I am so drawn to her. Her story really was an ordinary and simple one.

Here was a young woman who got pregnant, gave birth to her child, and raised a family with her working husband. She cared for her son, loved him, worried about him, agonized over him and finally wept at his death. Her story is the very human experience of being a mother. In her very ordinary life Mary is someone who is understandable to us. She is someone whom we can know and with whom we can identify. And yet into this young woman's ordinary life came an extraordinary announcement. She had been chosen to bear the Son of God.

I heard someone once remark, "I wonder how many women Gabriel approached who rejected his announcement before he finally spoke to Mary." Mary was the one who said, "Yes." Unclear and even a little frightened of what this announcement was to mean for her and for her son, she welcomed the angel's announcement with awe-inspiring courage and trust: "let it be according to your word." Mary's yes to bear God's son was only the beginning. It would eventually take her to the foot of the cross, to the empty tomb and even to the wind and fire of Pentecost. In every event and circumstance of her life, in both the suffering and in the joy, Mary remained faithful, "Here am I," she said, "the servant of the Lord."

ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH

Established in 1847

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With her yes, Mary launched out on a journey without any guarantees or any assurances, without any real road map for what lay ahead, fully relying on and trusting in her God. Mary is for all of us the model of faithfulness. She embodies the trust that is needed to accomplish God's reconciling work in the world. We are drawn to her because we maintain the hope that somehow we can become like her, somehow we too can respond to God with the same courageous and trusting "yes". Henri Nouwen suggests that just as a mother feels the child grow in her and is not surprised on the day of the birth but joyfully receives the one she learned to know during her waiting, so Jesus can be born in us. Like Mary, we too, can be places of nativity.

These days, Sue Monk Kidd is a famous best-selling author. Her book "The Secret Life of Bees," has even made it to the big screen. But, Sue Monk Kidd, a companion of mine since the 70's, began her career writing about her spiritual journey and search for God. In her book "When the Heart Waits," she describes a very imaginative way for us to envision our own journey to Bethlehem. She writes, "Once, when I visited a monastery around Christmas, I passed a monk walking outside the church. 'Merry Christmas,' I said. 'May Christ be born in you.' He replied.

I thought that a very peculiar greeting at the time, and I never forgot it. Now, all these years later, sitting beside the Christmas tree, I felt the impact of his words. The moment affirmed to me all over again what the real essence of spiritual transformation is all about; it's realizing more of our inner Christ-nature; it's discovering our soul and letting Christ be born from our waiting hearts. As the birthing begins, the soul becomes a nativity. The whole Bethlehem pageant starts up inside us. An unprecedented new star shines in our darkness – a new illumination and awareness. God sends Wisdom to visit us, bearing gifts. The shepherding qualities inside us are summoned to help tend what's being born. The angels sing and a whole new music begins to float in the spheres. Some new living, breathing dimension of the life of Christ emerges with a tiny cry that says, I am. One of the best parts of the whole drama is that it happens in the dung and the straw of our life, just as it happened long ago. Birthing Christ is an experience of humility. Mary's faithfulness was indeed that act of humility.

As we prepare to celebrate the Feast of the Incarnation, when miraculously God came to dwell among us as one of us, may we be encouraged by the example of our sister, Mary. May the Incarnate One be invited to dwell within us and express His reconciling love to the world through us, as he did through Mary.

And may this mother's unfailing trust in God's holy announcement give us the courage to make her words our words: Here we are servants of the Lord; let it be to us, according to your word. And.....

"May Christ Be Born In You."

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