

Sermons at St. Paul's

A Wellspring of Spiritual Nourishment; A River of Service in Jesus' Name

The Reverend Nancy Burton Dilliplane

December 27, 2009

In the name of the one who said, "Let the little children come unto me." AMEN.

On this Sunday after Christmas, as the three wise men are still making their way towards Bethlehem, I want to share with you the gifts of three wise *women*. Their words accompanied me as I journeyed to Bethlehem this year, and I share them with you this morning, as gold, frankincense and myrrh.

Since my reflection this morning is mainly about children, it is fitting that the first of my wise sisters is a 5 year old. Her name is Kerryn Elizabeth, and she is Charlotte Kleis' granddaughter.

Last week Charlotte was telling the Wednesday Bible Study group about her recent holiday adventure with her grandchildren: a ride on the Ivyland Railroad's North Pole Express with Santa and Mrs. Claus.

Once everyone had boarded the train, Charlotte reported, the conductor took out a bell. It's ringing would be the signal to fire up the engine. The only catch, the bell is silent to everyone, except those who truly believe. So, unless every passenger closed her eyes and said "I believe!" the train would not be able to leave the station. Charlotte said that when she looked over at Kerryn Elizabeth, her face was screwed up with 5-year-old intensity and she was chanting "I believe!" with such fervent seriousness and expectation that Charlotte said she believed, too. She just couldn't help it.

That's what started me thinking about belief and power. Belief as a source of power. Without belief, very little in life ever leaves the station.

In the beautiful prologue to his Gospel, John says "to all who received him, who *believed* in his name, he gave *power* to become *children* of God." Belief, power and children. I think that John is making a statement about the connection between those three things. Without the belief of the children to whom God's Word came as light and life, the gospel will never leave the station. Belief is what powers the grace and truth of gospel.

Charlotte sent me a photo from their train trip, and Kerryn's excited smile has kept me company all during the last week of Advent, as I worked on my sermons for Christmas Eve and for today. I keep coming back to her clear, trust-filled eyes and hope-filled grin and thinking about the world's children. Kerryn is the picture of a child who is loved, cherished, and cared for. She looks out from that photograph with the assurance of someone who believes without question that she is a child of God.

The trust and hope of children is important to the coming of God's kingdom. Elsewhere in the gospels Jesus tells us that unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself like a child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. (Matthew 18:1-5)

And I found myself wondering about the connection between the earnest, fervent, trusting belief of the child, Kerryn Elizabeth, and the fact that Christmas celebrates God's coming among us as a child. A child of God, God as a child.

And I found myself wondering again about the connection between belief and power. Power and belief. Belief and power. Belief and power and children. And I then I began to think about all the children of the world who do not have power. Those who do *not* have the assurance of being loved, cherished, and cared for. How many children born today are not born into circumstances that support the belief that they are beloved children of God? And what does it mean for the coming of God's kingdom that half of the world's children cannot believe in the in the reign of God, because they have never seen peace, justice, freedom and dignity?

It is a hard truth that, as the detritus of our Christmas celebrations lie scattered about our comfortable living rooms, every second child born into the world is born in poverty. 25,000 children will die today as a result of poverty: malnutrition, unsafe drinking water, poor sanitation, disease. Of the nearly 2 billion children in the developing world, 640 million (1 in 3) do not have adequate shelter. 400 million do not have potable water (1 on 5), 270 million (1 in 7) have no access to health services. 72 million have no access to even primary education.

How are these children ever to believe that they are children of God? If they cannot believe in justice and peace how will the reign of God be powered? How are these powerless and broken lives to power a reign of healing and wholeness? And what does it mean that we celebrate the birth of a Savior who was born as one of these little ones? The life which is the light of all people, the pure light which enlightens everyone was born a poor, homeless and threatened child.

The second of my wise sisters—a Franciscan sister, in fact—is Margaret Eletta Guider. Sister Margaret insists that God came among us as a poor, homeless infant as part of an intentional plan to involve us in the rebirth of creation. When the One through whom all things were created enters creation at its most vulnerable, all of humanity is called to participate in God's mending of creation because they must be attentive to the dependency of God.

Sister Margaret has written a challenging series of 10 reflections on the passion of Christ. Not only the passion of the crucified, adult Christ, but the passion of the Infant Jesus, and all that conspires against his ever growing to adulthood in the first place. She sees something unspeakably important in God's entrusting God's self to the care, concern and compassion of human beings. And she believes that the similarities between the man of Calvary and the infant of Bethlehem invites—no, compels—us to be serious about our care for the infants and children of the world. Because if we fail to do so, the Gospel will never leave the station.

Sister Margaret is adamant that the suffering of the Infant Christ is in solidarity with the suffering of every child, and is meant to remind us that God chose human infancy to begin the mending of creation. That God entrusts the divine self to our care, protection and loving service, in the baby of Bethlehem, and in the millions of children who still live in poverty and powerlessness. God's coming among us as a human infant, Sister Margaret says dignified and sanctified the very dependence and interdependence of creation. And so God's reign begins with recognizing, loving protecting and serving Christ in every infant and child.

Here is my paraphrase of her meditations:

1. Consider Christ, his life threatened by those who want him dead, approaching the hour of his passion, riding into Jerusalem on the back of a donkey.

And consider the unborn Infant Jesus, in his mother's womb, approaching the hour of his birth, as they are carried into Bethlehem on the back of a donkey.

Remember our baptismal commitment to care for all children, and pray for the unborn and at-risk children of our world.

Believe that in God's kingdom, every child is entitled to life.

2. Consider Calvary's Christ, sleeping his last sleep in his mother's arms, before being laid in the tomb.

And consider Bethlehem's Infant Jesus, sleeping his first sleep, cradled in his mother's arms.

Remember our baptismal commitment to all children and pray for the mothers who will cradle their living or lifeless children this day.

Believe that in God's reign every child deserves affection and security.

3. Consider Christ, who was named "King of the Jews"

And consider the Infant who was named "Jesus"—God will save. Consider how his naming gave shape to the life he led, endangered his life, as well as endangering the lives of other children.

Remember the importance of names in baptism, and pray for every child born without documentation, legal status, family identity, nationality or immigration papers.

Believe that in God's kingdom, each child is called by name and precious in God's sight.

4. Consider Christ on Calvary, betrayed and abandoned by his followers, stripped of his garments and all that he owned, and made poor by the forces of evil, oppression, and domination.

And consider the Infant in Bethlehem, displaced from his home in Nazareth, a refugee in Egypt, made poor by circumstances of politics, economics and society.

Remember our baptismal promise to work for justice and peace. Pray for all God's children who are at risk, who are abandoned or abused, forced into exile as refugees, unprotected as orphans.

Believe that in God's kingdom, all have a home and God will be in their midst.

5. Consider Christ on Calvary, laid upon a wooden cross, set between two thieves, and stretched, straightened, and fastened down.

And consider the Infant in Bethlehem, laid in a wooden manger, set in the midst of animals, and stretched out, straightened, and fastened in swaddling clothes.

Remember our baptismal promise to respect the dignity of every human being, and pray for children who are stretched or fastened down with disabilities, life-threatening illnesses, and chronic conditions.

Believe that in God's kingdom, the lame walk, the blind see, the deaf hear, wounds are bound up and the broken are made whole.

6. Consider how Christ was crucified outside the city wall, while Mary, his mother, powerless and helpless, stood by the foot of his cross.

And consider also the Infant was born outside of his own village, denied a room in Bethlehem, while his powerless parents stood by the manger where he was laid.

Remember our baptismal promise to resist evil, and pray for those children—and their powerless parents—who are denied access to human services, who experience exclusion from adequate housing, day care, schools, and health care.

Believe that in God's kingdom, no one is excluded and marginalized.

7. Consider how Christ was questioned by the chief priests and Temple authorities about his disciples and his teaching.

And consider how the Child Jesus was found sitting in the Temple among the teachers.

Remember our baptismal promise to continue the apostles' teaching, and pray for those without access to educational opportunities and activities that will enrich their lives.

Believe that God's kingdom is one of beauty and holiness, that enlives the body, mind and spirit.

8. Consider how Christ was taken captive and tortured, in the presence of witnesses, bystanders and soldiers.

And consider the Infant in Bethlehem, captive in his dependent infancy.

Remember our baptismal promise to resist evil, and pray for those children who suffer while others stand passively by.

Believe that in God's kingdom, captives are set free.

9. Consider how Christ was crucified under Pontius Pilate.

And consider also the many children who died in Bethlehem when Herod threatened the Infant Jesus.

Remember our baptismal promise to proclaim good news. Let us also speak out against bad news and cruelty, and give voice to those who have none. And pray for the children who suffer at the hands of adults who often carry out their cruelty with impunity.

Believe that in God's kingdom, God gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart.

10. Consider the ointment that was poured upon Christ in Bethany in anticipation of his death.

And consider also the gold, myrrh and frankincense that were poured out for the Infant Jesus in Bethlehem

Remember our baptismal promise to do all in our power to support the newly baptized in their lives in Christ, and pray that all children everywhere may receive the care, comfort, and support they need to grow live and grow strong.

Believe that children are the first citizens of God's kingdom.

The third wise woman is New Zealand hymn writer Shirley Erena Murray whose Christmas Hymn, *Star Child*, is reprinted in your bulletin. I'd like to end this reflection with Shirley's prayer that this year, the Gospel will at last leave the station and Christmas will come for all of God's children. Please join me in singing *Star Child*.