



The Nativity of Our Lord (C)
December 24, 2018
The Rev. Dr. Christian Brocato, Rector

+May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable to you, O God, our Strength and Redeemer. Amen.

Some of you may know that we at St. Mark's support the organization, Families Against Narcotics. That organization meets every month in the Parish Hall. It is a powerful organization changing lives as it supports family members dealing with the addiction crisis in Western Michigan. We offer a safe place where people can tell the stories of their lives, particularly the lives of loved ones, some still struggling with addiction and some having lost the battle to an addiction.

At the December meeting, a Service of Remembrance, both Mother Sue and I gave reflections. At its conclusion, a husband and wife asked to see the Sanctuary. As the history buff that I am, I went into tour guide mode with enthusiasm to 'tell the story' of this historic building and the congregation which has served God and God's people since 1836.

I love to tell the story that the largest section of the nave of the Church is the oldest standing public building in Grand Rapids. It dates to the mid 1840's, and people are always amazed.

In a conversation the next morning, a parishioner and I had a discussion about old hymns sometimes categorized as Gospel Hymns. We spoke about having grown up singing such hymns, and one of them came to mind, "I love to tell the story".

Our conversation moved in the direction of the pronoun, "I", as opposed to the "we" of worship. We gather together to worship. We pray together in this place. We are called to go into the world to 'tell the story' of Jesus Christ, his birth, his life, his sacrifice and his rising to give us the gift of eternal life.

I frequently say that the church will only grow through invitation and from people telling the story. People telling the story of personal transformation, the passion of having encountered the living God in the midst of God's people here at St. Mark, can be compelling. For over 182 years, parishioners of St. Marks have been 'telling the story'.

Our sister, Mary, who became the mother of Jesus, encountered the living God in the invitation she received from the message of an angel. That angel, that grace of God, came to Mary through a story, a story that she was to bear the Son of God and call him, Jesus. That story changed her life and the life of Joseph. The birth of Jesus changed their life.

Though we know little about the life of Mary and Joseph together, Mary's story is a bit clearer. The more important truth of the Gospel is about Jesus, his message, his call to his followers to walk in his footsteps and his challenge for them and for us to be bearers of peace, justice and mercy.

On this night, it is pretty easy to tell the story of the Hebrew prophets who we believed chronicled the birth of the Messiah to come. On this night, it is pretty easy to tell the story of the message of the angel to Mary that she would be the mother of the Messiah. On this night, it is pretty easy to retell the story of the angels appearing to the shepherds watching their flocks by night. On this night and however it happened, God's love came into the world in perhaps the most powerful story of all time after the creation of the world.

My message tonight is about 'story'. Yes, the story of the birth of the Messiah, Jesus. His story is our story when we claim it, make it our own and do our best to live it in the world. His story is a story of life, of truth, of justice, of equality, of inclusivity and of love which has no boundaries. Unfortunately, his story is seemingly more difficult for many people to hear in the chaos of the noise in which we live these days. That noise can be found all around us in another use of the word, 'story'.

I can hear my maternal grandmother, a faithful Seventh Day Adventist, admonishing my sister and me to tell the truth and not a story. That use of the word, 'story', is negative and ultimately means a lie. A lie by any other term is not the truth. Some people these days seem unable to hear when a story is true or when it is false. In order for us to know the difference, we need to dig deep within our hearts and listen. We need to dig deep and pay close attention, and ultimately, we will hear the truth.

What is the truth of the story of the Incarnation of God, the indwelling of God in the world in and through the birth of Jesus? What is the truth of the story not just as you and I might hear it but how it links us to untold millions of others over the centuries for whom the story of love made incarnate in Jesus was real? His story is life-changing, is life-challenging, and is life whenever we make it our own.

Tonight, we come together from many places to hear the story of the birth of Jesus Christ. For a few minutes in time, we become one with his story. The innocence of the baby in the manger gives us a glimpse of a place of rest, a place of peace, a place where the noise of life seems a distance away.

The shepherds returned to their flocks. The wise men to come on the Feast of Epiphany returned to the East. We presume that their lives were never the same. We know that the lives of the disciples of Jesus were never the same.

As sisters and brothers gathered here this night to celebrate the life of Jesus, our lives are forever changed. We are the beloved community of faith forever changed by the love of God in Christ Jesus. Let us wear that mantle with pride and go into the world to be bearers of truth, justice, mercy and love. It is who Jesus was and continues to be in and through each of us.

Beloved in Christ, may the blessings of this holy night, the blessings of Jesus, be in your heart now and throughout the year to come. Amen.