

4 Advent 2010

by Robert Bowler

Lectionary: Isaiah 7:10-16; Romans 1:1-7; Matthew 1:18-25; Psalm 80:1-7, 16-18

Wendell Berry wrote that "When despair for the world grows in me and I wake in the night at the least sound in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be, I go and lie down where the wood drake rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds. I come into the peace of wild things who do not tax their lives with forethought of grief. I come into the presence of still water For a time I rest in the grace of the world and am free."

Faith, hope, love, peace ... these are rare, precious commodities in our lives, particularly the week before the Christmas holiday. Despair and fear tax our lives, driving us to fret and worry, running errands, crossing off lists, searching, ever searching for that perfect gift, the little thing that will make our loved one happy, getting home and griping at that same loved one because we do so much ... oh, way too much ... losing sight of those precious commodities that cannot be bought. The irony is, they aren't even on that list, for they can't be checked off because we cannot buy them. They have to be nurtured, cultivated in the depths of our hearts in moments we must preserve for that purpose. Otherwise all our moments are gone in the headlong rush to buy, wrap and mound up those gifts under the sparkling tree.

When I was very little, we spent every Christmas at my grandparents large Victorian home in Plymouth, Massachusetts. Generations had been born and had died there since the early 1800's when my great grandfather built the house and established his tree farm. I remember the awe and wonder I felt quietly padding downstairs on Christmas morning before anyone else was awake. I would hold my breath when I entered the living room because something supernatural, I just knew, had happened over night. There was magic in that house to begin with, and on Christmas morning, the mystery sparkled brighter, my young heart opened to receive it and my wide eyes took it all in.

Now, we need to work hard to keep that magic alive in children's hearts and eyes, not to mention awakening it within us. Electronic gadgets, video games, plastic toys, all may be part of the magic of the child's Christmas world, but what about God or the Christ child or even the supernatural event of Santa Claus and his huge bag of toys in a sleigh pulled by flying reindeer reaching the homes of every girl and boy all around the globe in one night? Whatever the supernatural event may be, the awe and wonder of a child is the precious gift to be cultivated before the cynical materialism of our world can take over.

In times of despair, when all grace seems to abandon us and our hearts feel dead, in the stillness of the night an angel may appear to quicken us with new life. This is what happened to Joseph. We do not hear much about Joseph, the carpenter from Nazareth, whose quiet presence we know is in the background. We know he was engaged to Mary when, without his involvement, she became pregnant. He must have heard of this from his future in-laws and being human must have despaired of his situation. In those days the state did not provide social services for a single mother. No, this was instead a disgrace worthy of being stoned to death. We are told, however, that Joseph was a righteous man and planned instead to simply dismiss her quietly. Just when he came to this conclusion, in a dream, in the quiet of the night, when all was still, an angel appeared and explained that it was God's spirit that quickened Mary's womb, who, remaining pure, conceived a son. It was the same spirit that breathed on the primordial waters at the moment of creation and filled the disciples with tongues of fire at the moment of Pentecost.

And Joseph was told the son in Mary's womb has two names signifying his great purpose: Jesus meaning savior of the people, and Immanuel, God in our midst. The angel told Joseph not to be

afraid and take Mary as his wife, which is as much to say he is to be a husband and father, for God's great purpose is to be fulfilled and he must be faithful, care for them, keep them safe, watch over them, so that God's will may be done for the world.

Faith, contrary to popular understanding, is not belief. Faith is not simply believing in a statement such as the creed though that may well be part of it. Rather it is a deep and abiding trust in a living reality. That reality may be a parent or spouse or it may be God or Christ or Spirit or Life. Usually we have faith in that which is beyond the everyday material world of money, markets and materialism. Faith is the opposite of cynicism as love is the opposite of fear and peace is the opposite of frenzied chaos, for the former in each case cancels out the possibility of the latter.

Joseph loved Mary, and perhaps he first heard about her pregnancy from Mary's family, urging him to quietly set her aside so that word of her indiscretion did not spread. He was ready to act faithfully when, in the quiet of the night he was visited by an angel who told him the situation was not as it appears. He responded faithfully, married her and at every juncture, acted out of a place of deep and abiding trust in God, knowing that God was working in his little family and he had a crucial role to play in that work. His faith was never without love and hope and it grew in moments of peace, when the angel visited him in the quiet of the night.

Let us, as faithful people, take time this season to become like Joseph, quietly, faithfully, acting from a place of love in service to God in our midst. He knew in his heart his role in the birth of the savior of the people, Jesus. What do you know of your role in service to God in our midst, in the movement of God's spirit as it sweeps through you and those you love this Christmas time. Will Christmas sparkle with awe and wonder reflected in a child's eyes and open heart because you are faithful to their growing soul as well as their playful spirit? Will your quiet presence bring love and saving grace in family and friends? Cultivate quiet times in your busy life so that an angel may appear to give life both hope and purpose.

Never squash the wonder and awe in a child's (or an adult's) eyes and open heart, for it is sacred. Let their spirits blossom unhindered. Allow the Mary's in your life to sing their magnificent because their spirit is not squelched by judgment and cynicism. Provide safe places, no matter how humble, for Christ to be born in your hearts. Listen to angels speak in the stillness of the night and follow their instructions until lives sparkle with faith, hope, love and peace. Know that when despair for the world grows you can rest in the peace of wild things knowing the beauty of God's creation. Rest in grace and know you are free. Only thus will the Christ be born in our hearts and be in our midst, here, now, everyday. **Amen.**