

Break Out
Luke 1:46-55
Fourth Sunday in Advent, December 20, 2009

I have a Christmas story to tell you this morning. There are three odd things about the story. First, the story is true. It really happened and it really happened here at South Church. Some of you already know parts of the story and the rest of you can stop outside in the plaza in front of the church on your way out and see the evidence for yourself. The second thing about the story is that there is no punch line, which is a way of saying that the story is not done yet; there's more to come. Thirdly, either the story is just what it is, or it isn't *just* what it is and is therefore something *more*. You may decide upon hearing the story that the facts are just facts. Or, you may decide to praise God for all that is strange and wonderful that God does – just as Mary does in her song called “The Magnificat.”

Remember that Mary was nobody in particular in an out-of-the-way corner of an obscure province in a huge empire. Her news that she was pregnant was either just a statistic – one more unwed teenage mom – or her news was more than that, news worthy of an extraordinary God with an extraordinary plan. Which was it?

The question I bring to you this morning is this: *Which is it in our lives?* Do we perceive the extraordinary plan of an extraordinary God in our lives? Or, are the facts of our lives *just* the facts? Is Christmas just a story, or is it a song breaking out of us because we have an *awesome* God?

My story begins many years ago. When I first arrived here at South Church and had spent some time in the neighborhood, I noticed

that this was a dark and cheerless corner of the city. Remember that – at that time -- the office building across the street (now the VNA) was empty, the old Milton Bradley headquarters up Maple Street was vacant, the little Greek Revival house up High Street was falling down, and we did not at that time have lights shining on the church at night. And come Christmas time, there was no evidence that Christmas was even coming to South Church. If you weren't a member on the mailing list, you would have had no idea that Christmas was coming to the corner of Maple and High Streets.

I conceived the idea that at the very least, we should put wreaths on the doors of the church in front and on High Street. Moreover, it seemed to me that because I could hear not only English but Spanish and Russian spoken outside the church, we should have Merry Christmas written on the wreaths in three languages. People would then perhaps realize that Christmas was coming to the neighborhood.

Now the secretary of the church at that time was a wise and hard-working woman by the name of Dorothy. Dorothy was an old campaigner and when she heard this then young pastor proclaim enthusiastically that we should make some Christmas on the doors of the church, she reminded me that this is the city and it isn't likely that those wreaths would long remain on those doors. Being stubborn (as I am), I said in reply that if we got a week or two out of them leading up to Christmas Eve, it would be worth while and people of good will would get the idea that Christmas happens at South Church. So we ordered the wreaths in three languages. They arrived about ten days before Christmas. One weekday morning we hung the wreaths on the outside doors of the church and went about our business.

Well, they lasted maybe..... forty-five minutes. I went out to sneak a peek at my idea, and they were gone, stolen right off the doors of the church. I don't know whether one person took all three, or three persons each took one in his or her own language, but apparently somebody needed them more than we did. We didn't replace them.

And inside, I had this feeling: *Oh, yuck, is this all there is?* Does Christmas cheer really not apply here?

Fast forward a few years. It wasn't Christmas time, but we decided that it was now time to brighten up the corner of Maple and High Streets. We had lit up the plaza in front of the church with the great standing lights so you can see the church from all over the city at night. It wasn't such a dark corner any more. We worked on our place in the city – making a warming place in the church for the homeless, starting to make a place for kids from the streets of the city, struggling through our process of becoming an Open and Affirming Church: the church that is the heart of the city.

About that time we also decided to make a splash at Christmas. The choir planned to put on a big musical presentation. We got new candles and red candle cups. We spent some money putting the word out about Christmas at South Church on mailing lists and in the newspaper – big ads. And, wanting still to put some Christmas cheer on the face of the church, Dave Carlson designed a huge wreath to put up. It was a beautiful thing to behold, made of real greens on a steel structure, with bright lights. This time we decided to put it up where nobody could reach it, which, of course, meant bringing in a mechanical lift. It was beautiful up there and no matter which way you were going on Maple Street at night and no matter how fast you were going, you could not miss that bright, cheery Christmas wreath on the face of the church.

So it was for a couple years. But then came budget cuts and trimming of staff. It didn't seem right, somehow, to throw nearly \$1000 a year redoing and rehangng this wreath just for Christmas in tough economic times. So one Christmas the big wreath just didn't go back up; it stayed where it is now, in the basement of the church.

And once again, I had this feeling: *Oh, yuck. Is this all there is to Christmas in the city? And in a church, no less?*

It's been a few years now. In the mean time we've continued to work on our place and mission at the heart of the city. We've hung other signs of our presence on the church. People notice the church and what we're about. We get gang-tagged from time to time. We have a rainbow flag out in front of the church representing the extraordinary love and welcome of God to all God's people. That flag gets cut down once in a while by God knows whom, and a few weeks ago somebody tried to burn it up. The flag is repaired now and ready to go back up to say what it says about who we are. We're sort of stubborn about our message. I wish it wasn't such hard work in the city some times, but there you go.

A couple of weeks ago I was thinking about Christmas at South Church, what it has been and what it is now. We don't try to make a big splash anymore. It's about the message now. The candles and sermons and carols are lovely, but it's about the message: *God has come. God is with us. The light that lit the darkness is here on the corner of Maple and High Streets: all are welcome, all are loved, all are forgiven, all are part of an extraordinary plan.* The message is a good one, and it lights up our hearts. We don't spend a lot of money at Christmas anymore. We're here on

Christmas Eve at 5:30 on the corner of Maple and High Streets and any one who wants to sing and watch for the coming One is invited to join us. It is what it is.

Still, I was missing the idea that we can light up the face of the building. I like Christmas lights. Just when you think, *Oh, that's right, I remember, Christmas is coming*, you see lights that brighten something inside you, and you say, *Oh, **right**, Christmas **is** coming!* So, I thought to myself that we ought to just pull the old wreath structure out of the basement and just spend the money and dress the building up some for Christmas. Go ahead, I thought, Christmas is coming. But then I thought, *Naw, it's not right. Christmas comes and Christmas goes, but come the day after Christmas there are many good ways to use that money.*

Mmmm-mmmm. *Oh, yuck.*

Then, a week ago Friday, I got a call. The Community Music School, an organization we have supported over the years, was in something of a quandary. Their community children's chorus had participated in a television event sponsored by BIG Y Stores. As a thank you for the chorus' participation, the BIG Y public relations firm, which is way out in Detroit, sent a great big Christmas wreath to the Community Music School. Huge – six feet across with bright lights on it. There was even a price tag: six hundred dollars! But the Community Music School is very careful not to show that it leans this way or that religiously. They are afraid that if they display this big wreath, it's going to upset somebody because it's a *Christian* symbol! Imagine that. A wreath. Go figure. Anyway they wanted to know if we would take it off their hands!

What a lovely gift! Alax our security guard went down last Friday in his pick up truck and brought it back. It's pretty big. How to get it up? And where is the money going to come from?

On Tuesday last, Dave Carlson and I were standing in the kitchen of South Church with the electricians who are working on some of our sanctuary lights and I brought up the wreath. One of the guys said, *A wreath on the front of the church? You want it up? We can do that for you—our gift! Merry Christmas!*

So, today we have a wreath on the face of the church again. You can see it for yourself. And if you drive by at night, you will see the face of the church smile and you will know that Christmas is here.

Imagine this. We didn't have to work so hard to make Christmas happen. We didn't have to spend money. All we had to do was "bear God's message": *All are welcome. All are loved. All are forgiven. All are part of God's plan.* And then, somehow, the wreath happened all on its own. You can see it for yourself.

Either it is what it is, or there is something more. Something breaking out that we don't control. Something that is blessed. Something that is not overcome in the darkness. Something that makes the candles and the carols come alive!

I said in the beginning of this sermon, that the story is not done. There's something missing. Or someone. There's light and a wreath and a smile on the face of the church. But Christmas is more. Christmas is a human voice breaking out, praising God, singing just as Mary did, that *My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my savior, making the good news heard*, for we believe that what happened long ago happens still, here, in this place, and there is an extraordinary plan for us to live into.

I invite you to join me early on Christmas Eve, at 5:00, to complete the picture and the song. No matter what the weather, we'll step out on the plaza in front of the church, under the new Christmas wreath, with candles and carols. Think of it as our own Christmas pageant. We are today's shepherds, wise men and women, Mary, Joseph, onlookers, dressed just as we are, breaking out in song, praising God who has a plan for our life together right here in the heart of the city. You see, many people would like to know that God *is* with us all and the story – our story – their story -- is not done. But who will hear and believe unless we sing? Who will notice unless we step out the door under the beautiful wreath that we received because of all we have given?

Christmas, you see, is what it is – *and so much more!*

Amen