

"A Cinderella Story"

"The Wonder of a Child"

Isaiah 14:3-4a, 11-17; Luke 1:11-18; Revelation 2:18-29

I would like you to play a brief game of "Who am I?" Listen as I read a few lyrics of a song and see if you can guess who sang them. "Impossible. For a plain yellow pumpkin to become a golden carriage, impossible. For a plain country bumpkin and a prince to join in marriage, and four white mice will never be four white horses. Such fol-de-rol and fiddle-dee-dee of course is impossible." Who am I?

Early this past week as I was contemplating and envisioning today's worship service and the unique but most important part to be played by our young people, it occurred to me that the youngest of them probably have little comprehension as to the reality of what happened in and throughout the nativity stories. The older youth of course know that none of the things they told about in their telling of the story could happen without God making it happen. Outside of providence and the realm of the miraculous, it was impossible. I think we all can smile as we envision the youngest among us, however willing or enthusiastic (or not) playing their part but with little to no comprehension of the fullest reality. Like us, in time they will grow into fuller knowledge and appreciation for the miraculous which they portrayed but little of which they presently understand.

As I contemplated these things a particularly pertinent Scripture verse came to mind. "I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it." (Luke 18:17, NIV) To receive the kingdom of God involves accepting the impossible. Indeed, a little later in the Lucan birth narrative the Holy Spirit tells Mary, "... nothing is impossible with God." (Luke 1:37, NIV) IN the realm of impossibilities another key verse came to mind, Hebrews 11:6. "... without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him." (NIV)

I intentionally halted the Zechariah narrative where I did because it is abundantly clear that what the angel had prophesied about the coming of a child to Elizabeth and himself, at their most advanced age, might be something approaching the impossible. Before we are quick to come to this conclusion and thus perhaps condemn him for his lack of faith, we need to remember that Zechariah was one of the priests of the temple and on that particular day he was the priest directly in charge of that day's ritual. Therefore it is generally assumed that, as with all priests of this level of service, he had to have known of the miraculous conception of Hannah as told in 1 Samuel. Zechariah surely had to have known the story very well. Except that we see a bit ambivalence in Zechariah's words, "How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years." Impossible?

In case I haven't alluded to it yet, this is something of a Cinderella story, a story where that which, by all earthly measure would be totally impossible, turns out to be very possible.

I don't know about you but earlier this fall when it appeared we might not have a children's program, I was saddened at the thought. For, these annual

programs have been an Advent staple of the church for generations. I am most grateful to Alicia for her willingness to respond with what I believe was the Holy Spirit prompting her to even attempt the project. Just so you know, she is quick to note that the idea was not hers but of which she had heard elsewhere. But that being said, who would attempt something so utterly new and difficult? As I think she would agree, we give God all the credit and we are thankful for the calling and the gifts and resources to do something that approaches the impossible.

There is something more than a heart-warming and engaging aspect to children's Christmas programs. Yes, they are heart-warming and engaging, but there is something far deeper going on. In spite of the fact that we can't always make out the words recited, in spite of the fact of failed props and prompts, the Gospel message is proclaimed loud and clear. The antics and facial expressions of the children are priceless as they attempt to do the bidding of the program director. It has been said that no one but the worst Grinch in the world would belittle the little ones for lines forgotten or mixed up. In essence, we really don't care. We know them. We just want the children to experience the experience that God has afforded them. And yet, we also know that God is speaking to his children of all ages. We are reminded of the simplicity of young minds not yet cluttered up with notions of what is impossible and what is not.

One point of this is that Christmas programs may be seen as part of the training of these young and impressionable minds, the expected training in the ways of God, truth, and righteousness. I won't go into a detailed examination of our lesson from Revelation, the 4th letter of Revelation written to the church at Thyatira, but only touch on a point or two.

It is written that "I know your deeds, your love and faith, your service and perseverance, and that you are now doing more than you did at first." It goes on a little later, saying to those who have rejected false teachings and been involved in all kinds of detestable immoralities, "...hold on to what you have until I come." Raising up the next generation of believers is one of the important purposes of the church. At present, it is also one of the greatest challenges of the church.

I have a brief story of my own to tell and that in terms of Cinderella.

As a young boy I watched Rogers and Hammerstein's tv production of Cinderella, the star of which was Leslie Ann Warren. A week and a half ago or so we saw a promo clip of that production and my mind was sent reeling back some 5 or 6 decades or so. As a maturing adolescent, over time I became enamored, even infatuated, with "Cinderella". She was so beautiful and kind and..., and..., and I don't know what all. I was smitten! But in addition to her physical beauty, her inner beauty was obvious, too. In addition, it was the nasty and vile words, attitudes, and actions of her evil step-mother and step-sisters that frustrated me and thus caused a welling up of sympathy in my heart. "Who are they to mistreat someone so sweet, kind, innocent, and who is willing to serve them faithfully under such harsh conditions?" Their bitterness, petty jealousy, and vile attitudes actually crushed my spirit. I felt so sorry for her. One lesson here is empathy for those who are wrongfully treated; this is a key attitude Jesus wants to see fostered in his disciples. I can still remember being absolutely

broken-hearted and even brought to tears as Cinderella is sent back dejectedly to "her corner" by the fireplace as her step-mother and step-sisters go off to the ball; and this after making Cinderella help them get ready. As she sobbed so did I.

However, as we know, the story turns out well at the end. The impossible becomes possible after all.

One of the things that I'm attempting to do by this discussion is to stimulate not simply the imagination of the child but to impart to them a sense of their worth and value in the kingdom of God. We want to grow in them a wonder of the things of God. The birth stories they tell as young children will take on different dimensions and meanings as they grow older. The wonder of Christmas of a 4 year old is not the same wonder we want them to have as a teenager, nor as a mature adult. In line with my earlier theme of A Charley Brown Christmas, this past week I saw a meme of Charley Brown and his simple little Christmas tree with the caption reading: "Dear Lord, all I want for Christmas is for my family and friends to know Jesus." That is why the center piece of A Charley Brown Christmas was Linus's recitation of the birth of Jesus. And just about the time I ran across that meme I saw another pertinent meme which read: "If we don't teach our children to follow Christ, the world will teach them not to." In the midst of the seemingly secular nature of the program the truth about what is most important was told explicitly. Those who have ears, let them hear. Amen.