

Redemption Bearers

John 1:1-18
Genesis 3:8-15
Galatians 4:4-7
Isaiah 9:2-7
Luke 1:26-38
Micah 5:2-5
Luke 2:1-7
Psalm 148:1-2
Luke 2:8-20
2 Chronicles 9:22-24
Matthew 2:1-11
Daniel 7:13-14
Philippians 2:1-11

One of my favorite scared paintings is called "Mary Consoles Eve" by Sister Grace Remington. It depicts Eve, eyes downcast, holding an apple, clothed in animal skins, with a serpent wrapped around her leg. Standing across from her is a pregnant Mary, one hand on Eve's face, her other hand hold's Eve's to her swollen belly, foot firmly planted across the serpent's head. It is a profoundly powerful image displaying the complex entirety of being human. Each of us inhabit both images. Each of us holds our eyes downcast from the incriminating bite missing from the forbidden fruit in our hand. Each of us also bears within us the mystery of the Messiah's redemption. We are all utterly broken and fully restored. In my opinion, the most profound thing about this representation is Mary's offer of consolation and restoration back to Eve. In all our brokenness, in all the harm we cause ourselves and one another, because of Christ, we are also instrumental means through which Jesus redeems that brokenness.

The Lessons and Carols service is beautiful because it offers us the whole story in a single morning. John tells us of Christ's glory which existed before the world, the glory that brought the world into being, the glory that would be our source of healing before any brokenness existed. Genesis reveals the first sin and the entrance of the curse. Then a whole slew of voices heralds the coming of our redemption, the Messiah, who would heal the consequences of that sin. Daniel signals to the second coming when the Messiah's work will be fully and finally finished. Then Paul concludes with his letter

to the Philippians explaining how we ought to live in response to this amazing story. Today's liturgy is a wonderfully compact way of situating the creche within the framework of the larger story in which we all live. It's like a Christmas present tied up with a big bow.

WE start with Adam and Eve, hiding in the garden, afraid of our own naked shame and afraid of God's reaction. Isaiah links this hiddenness and its consequence with spiritual darkness. In our Christmas story Jesus enters at night, breaking into this troubled world under cover of darkness; **into** that darkness with us.

John tells us that Jesus' light broke through the darkness of our night, destroying its power. Isaiah calls Jesus the "great" light. That Hebrew word is difficult to translate, but it means strange, large, important, and ancient. The blaze of the Ancient of Days was enveloped within the glow of an infant's skin. That remarkable light illumined the skies when the shepherds watched the angels proclaim it's coming. The wise men were drawn by its light through a strange star. Like us, those magi left the familiarity and comforts of home to follow this strange, ancient, light; determined to be near its presence and feel its warmth shining on us.

John says this true light, the person of Jesus, is what enlightens and illuminates every human heart. We are lights in this world, candles piercing the darkness. In the shadow of winter's gloom, it can be difficult to remember that we are bearers of this light. Like Eve, in Sister Grace's painting, our eyes can become downcast. And in looking down we fail to see the light radiating from us into the world. We can miss seeing the power and impact of that light. Mary's gentle reminder to Eve of the power of Jesus' light to conquer her deepest darkness is the gift we all need from ourselves and one another. Paul reminds the church in Galatia that they are adopted children of God and heirs. Part of that inheritance is participation in the family business which is the redemption of the world. The light we bear is meant to be spread.

On Christmas Eve when we sing Silent Night while lighting one another's candles, this idea takes shape. The church lights are dimmed, and a flame moves from one small

candle to another as we offer our flames to illumine our neighbors. Darkened faces suddenly glow and glimmer in the flickering light as the darkness is pushed back by our offering of light from one person to another. In a metaphorical way, this is what Paul referred to when saying we should look to the interests of others, regarding them and not just ourselves. We must allow the light to shine through us, brightening others, if we desire to participate in our father's strange and ancient work of illuminating the world.

Evelyn Underhill, the 20th century theologian said, "Holiness is not brightness of our own making, but the removal of whatever blocks the divine Light." When we remind ourselves and one another that our humanity is not an impediment, but our greatest asset in communicating this light to the world, we participate in God's work of redemption. In fact, helping to restore the dignity of creatures made in the image of God can be the most profound way to reestablish God's divine and strange light back into this world.

The stories found in today's readings illustrate a tremendous diversity of people. Most of the main characters God elevates through these stories were those whose dignity was obscured, whose light had been overlooked or quenched by a world that ranks value differently than God. Our world looks at status, wealth, and influence to determine which people to elevate, whereas God chooses the outsider, foreigners, servants, the poor, the unhoused, and the religiously unacceptable. The divine light shines in all the places we are not taught to look; often, in fact, the places we are taught to fear and despise.

These stories offer us an opportunity to test the boundaries of our own willing participation in God's work. If we had been present at the events in these readings, how would we have responded? In our immediate story we encounter God's mother, an unwed teenager whose betrothed husband was stigmatized by her ill-timed pregnancy of unknown origin. Both of whom had a fantastical story explaining their awkward predicament. How do we feel about alternative family structures? Are we welcoming and supportive to families and people whose stories don't make sense to

us? We also encounter the shepherds, the religiously unclean who lived unhoused, in poverty on the margins of society, unwashed, and uncivilized. How do we feel about those who live in filthy conditions, smelly, who use coarse language, and have bad manners? Would we welcome the bedraggled onto the pew beside us if our noses recoiled? Would we hug them while exchanging the peace if their soiled clothes threatened to stain our own? Would their children's inappropriate chatter and inability to sit still make us wish they'd chosen to worship with the Baptists? We also encounter the Magi, foreigners of a different race, practitioners of Eastern religion and astrology. How do we feel about those who wear turbans or hijabs? Do we honor their national identity and religious practice, or do we find them threatening? In all of these cases, do we believe that these others, these outsiders might have something to teach us about God? Or perhaps there is another group we find uncomfortable or upsetting? The Christmas story invites us to ask whose dignity has been darkened in our eyes and are we willing to allow God to restore it? Are we willing to see every person with the heart of their creator and to seek their light as fiercely as does their Messiah? Do we pursue those different from us with the expectation that God's light in them shines in a way that can illumine the dark places in us?

If we believe that the pursuit of God's restoration is about the removal of whatever blocks the divine light, and if we genuinely believe in the inherent dignity of all people, then our pursuit of holiness must work toward uncovering the shame, rejection, and alienation of ALL people. And rather than using our prejudice to shame ourselves, we must be honest in identifying it, so we can be equally rigorous in rooting it out.

The entire Christmas story is comprised of unexpected people performing essential roles in the work of bringing the Messiah and his message of restoration into this world. Just like in Sister Grace's painting where Eve's disgrace is healed through Mary's consolation. We are all vital candle bearers, lighting up this world through our recognition of the dignity of others, and seeking to heal brokenness.

May we be a people who believe God's light can and will shine brightly through the most unexpected of humanity so that we look into every face with the expectation of God's light. And when we see a face that fails to shine, may we work to dismantle their barriers, so we can stand side by side, lighting up the whole world's darkness with the brightness of the divine light.