

*“Christmas: Only for the Rich?”*

*Isaiah 7:10-16; Matthew 1:18-25*

*Christmas Sunday, Advent IV, December 22, 2013*

*Mary Taylor Memorial United Methodist Church, Milford, Connecticut*

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Names have been on my mind as I’ve looked for gifts for my nieces and nephews. It’s pretty easy to find notepads and pens and other such things for Matthew and Andrew. Even Erica, spelled with a “c” and not a “k.” But just try finding one for my youngest niece, Skylar!

Unusual names are in the ear of the beholder. What sounds unusual to one person sounds natural to others. Some names are not as much unusual as they require attentiveness. My friend Byron Crosdale is named after Lord Byron, the British poet. After we became staff members together at The Council of Churches of Greater Bridgeport, we’d often get each other’s calls from the switchboard operator.

But some names ARE truly unusual. My dad, as a young Maryland State trooper, personally knew a taxi driver, a Mr. Bugg. An African-American from South Carolina who moved north and became a property owner, Mr. Bugg was an important source of information for my father, who in turn gave him legal counsel on some of his property matters, including showing my dad legal papers with Mr. Bugg’s legal name on it. Mr. Bugg’s skin had a pinkish tinge. So his parents decided an appropriate first name, his actual given name on the legal document, not a nickname—and I am not making this up—was “Pink.” Pink Bugg.

Perhaps then the name of the Savior as announced in today’s readings is not so far-fetched: “Jesus,” which means “Yahweh shall save” and “Emmanuel” which means “God is with us.” Certainly these names are familiar enough to most of us that we take them for granted.

Do we also take for granted what they announce? God is in the saving business. God’s presence at Christmas is spelled p-r-e-s-e-n-c-e. This God-with-us is for all people, announced to the wealthiest of the wealthy—King Ahaz of the 7<sup>th</sup> century B.C.—and the poorest of the poor, Joseph of Nazareth.

We have no doubt that a king would be wealthy. That Joseph and Mary were poor is a scholarly conclusion long accepted based on biblical and cultural knowledge too long to detail. Here is one brief example: after Jesus' birth, Mary and Joseph present themselves for ritual purification as described in Luke 2:22-24. Luke says "*and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, 'a pair of turtle doves or two young pigeons.'*" What Luke does **not** say, because his readers would have known it, was that this was the offering permitted **poor** people. Two offerings were actually required: a "burnt" offering, designed to please God and, quite frankly, provide food for the priests; and a "sin" offering. Leviticus 12:2-8 stipulates that a "*lamb in its first year*" is the standard "burnt" offering, for obvious reasons: most of us would rather eat lamb than pigeon. But Mary and Joseph were excused from this requirement because they were poor.

The temple in Jerusalem is long gone and with it the system of sacrifice. But I sometimes wonder if, in losing its explicit guidelines for those who have less, we have lost our ability to see **all** people, regardless of economic status, as people of sacred worth for whom Emmanuel also came. The context of the Gospel today is the social impropriety of Mary's pregnancy. Joseph wasn't the father, but he needed a dream to wake him up to the reality that this *poor* child, born to *poor* parents, in a backwater flat in a far-flung outpost of the Roman empire, was God's way of entering the world. God does things like that, you know? Shows up in a most unlikely way, in the most unlikely circumstances, including to and with poor people.

Do not mistake what I have said for romanticizing poverty. No one I know who has experienced poverty likes it or desires to remain so. Indeed, some of you have told me stories of *your* rise from poverty to a life of relative economic success. Such personal transformations inspire and reflect hope for the improvement of the conditions of all people. They remind us there is always the hope for self-improvement and that we need always see a person first because conditions can and do change.

Yet make no mistake about what I am saying, which is both a word of caution and a word of hope.

The word of caution is to those of us who are blessed with material abundance. As we consider our poor neighbors it is simply *“there but for the grace of God go you and me.”* From gifts for the children at Boys’ and Girls’ Village to the Alternative Giving Catalog we are a giving people. One of our members this week shared our work for Boys’ and Girls’ Village and received hundreds of additional dollars for these children, simply by asking.

What is key is that we remember that we could, and perhaps have, walked the way of poor people. That “they” are “us:” people for whom Christ also died. Poverty did not stop God from choosing Mary and Joseph, and it must not stop us from treating all people with respect, regardless of their economic fortunes.

Dorothy Day was a Roman Catholic laywoman who connected faith and justice. She started the *Catholic Worker* newspaper in the 1930’s and opened a settlement house of hospitality for the poor of which there are nearly 200 today. While she was still alive, the settlement house in Manhattan paid the rent for an elderly woman named Weasel (did I mention unusual names?) who lived with her mentally handicapped son. Jim Forest, former editor of the *Catholic Worker*, described Weasel: *“She had a terrible temper, never said thank you, always felt we weren’t doing all we should for her. She had an irritating voice and a hawk eye.”*

Dorothy Day wasn’t necessarily any kinder to Weasel than anyone else, but she was very patient. One day a rich woman came to the settlement house and gave Dorothy a diamond ring. Forest writes: *“Dorothy thanked the visitor matter-of-factly and slipped the ring in her pocket. Later in the day Weasel happened to drop by. Dorothy took the diamond ring from her pocket and gave it to Weasel, who put it on her finger in a matter-of-fact way and left. I had the impression that Weasel thought it should have been a bigger diamond. One of the staff protested to Dorothy that the ring could better have been sold at the*

*Diamond Exchange on West 47<sup>th</sup> Street and the money used to pay the woman's rent for a year. Dorothy replied that the woman had her dignity and could do as she liked with the ring. She could sell it...or take a trip to the Bahamas....or enjoy having a diamond ring on her hand... 'Do you suppose,' Dorothy asked, 'that God created diamonds only for the rich?'"*

I hope, as we help others and perhaps even remember a time when we were helped, we will remember that we do this because it is the right thing to do; because it is what Christ would have us do; and because the neighbor whom we help is a person of sacred worth.

That is the word of hope: we are people of sacred worth. Rich and poor. Young and old. Gay and straight. Male and Female. Educated in school and educated by life. Christ comes to set us free to be the people God intends. Christ comes to help us see in every child the possibility of “Emmanuel,” God breaking through our weariness and cynicism to redeem us. Christ comes to preserve our dignity and to help us see the dignity in the other. Christ comes to take away our fear. The angel said to Joseph: “Do not be afraid.” Do not be afraid, whether the fear is not having enough not being good enough or fear of brokenness or loneliness or disease or death.

You know, I never did find that pen for my niece with her name, “Skylar,” on it. But I did find out what her name meant. It means “strength, love and beauty, and eternal life.”

This baby with the unusual names—Jesus, Emmanuel—comes that we might be saved, that we might know that God is with us. He comes that we might have abundant life now, full of strength and love and beauty, a foretaste of that eternal life sealed by the child himself. That we should have the privilege of being his ambassadors, sharing with others from our abundance—both in the things we provide them and the dignity we show them—confirms what we already knew: that Christmas is not only for the rich, but for all! And in the words of the carol, it “*fits us for heaven to live with thee there.*” Merry Christmas!