Holiday Foolishness

Luke 1:39-49

> In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord." And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name.

Sunday, December 20, 2009

A couple of times this Advent I've told you that this season in the church year messes with our concept of time. We have to think forward and backward simultaneously. And this morning is no different. Today, I want us to think forward about a week, to the day after Christmas.

The day after Christmas was a special holiday when I was growing up. I think it was called, "Try-on-all-your-new-clothes-and-put-away-your-toys Day." You see, on Christmas evening, after all the presents had been opened, my mom was pretty lenient with letting us leave piles of stuff around the living room. We spent the evening playing with new games and toys, or watching new movies together. There was no pressure to clean up anything other than the piles of torn wrapping paper and any dirty dishes.

But the day after Christmas was another story. It was time to start getting back to normal. But for countries with a strong British heritage, the day after Christmas is a state holiday known as Boxing Day. It's become just another commercialized holiday. In fact, like the day after Thanksgiving for us, in many countries, Boxing Day is the biggest, craziest shopping day of the year. But it didn't start out that way.

Originally, Boxing Day, also known as St. Stephen's Day, was a day for giving gifts to those less fortunate than yourself. On Christmas Day, people traditionally exchanged gifts with their social equals – friends, family members and colleagues. But the following day, people gave gifts to those lower on the social ladder. Recall the words of Good King Wenceslas. He looked out "on the feast of Stephen" – Boxing Day. And what did he see out his window? A poor man. Most of us only know the first verse. But as the song goes on, it tells the story of this king following the poor man home through the snow to bring him a fine meal. Of course, the king takes one of his servants with him to help carry the load. As they journey, the king's servant admits that he is freezing. So the king, in an act of mercy, tells him to walk behind him, in his footsteps, so his feet won't get any wetter or colder.

I'm not sure that would make me feel any warmer as I trudged through the snow, but that's the point of the song. In fact, the last two lines read:

> Therefore, Christian men, be sure, wealth or rank possessing
> Ye who now will bless the poor, shall yourselves find blessing.

So Boxing Day is about those who have money or social status finding a way to share that with others. Most traditions you'll read about are about giving money or material goods. But there are stories about sharing social status as well.

There's an episode of the TV show M*A*S*H that explores the concept of Boxing Day. Set in the Korean War, this medical unit decides to lift everyone's morale after another Christmas Day far from home. They do this by having the officers and enlisted personnel switch places for a day. Majors are changing bedpans and a corporal is the commanding officer. The only exception is for medical care and treatment. Initially, the enlisted folks are more excited about this than the officers, because they get to watch their superiors do their grunt work for the

day. The officers are less enthusiastic, and some are downright opposed to the whole thing, calling the plan foolish.

But it turns out, sometimes foolishness can be a good tool. As the episode unfolds and these people walk in each other's shoes, they learn a whole new appreciation for what the other does. The officers realize how hard the enlisted folks work, and the enlisted people realize what hard decisions the officers have to make. The foolish action of switching places for a day ends up making the whole outfit run better.

It turns out, foolishness has been used throughout history to teach a lesson or make a point that would otherwise be difficult. The European monarchies made use of court jesters, not only to entertain, but also to point out things that no one else would dare mention. James VI of Scotland didn't bother to read things before he signed them. So his jester tricked him into signing a document that made the jester king in his place for 15 days. I'm guessing that James learned his lesson.

This morning, we have our fair share of foolishness here in church. Just look at our Scripture reading. Talk about challenging the social order. Our main characters this morning are two pregnant women – one who is young, poor and unmarried, and one who is way too old to be pregnant in the first place. Add to that these women are from "a Judean town in the hill country." They don't even live in a place that's important enough to write down the name of the town! These are the women that God has chosen to prepare the way of the Messiah? We're so used to hearing the Christmas story that we've forgotten how absurd it really is.

John the Baptist born to a couple that's way too old to conceive. Jesus, on the other hand, born to a couple that's so young they haven't gotten married yet. The all-important Messiah is born in a lowly manger, surrounded by farm animals. And while that may make a nice picture to

color in Sunday school, have you ever smelled sheep up close? Or tried to keep warm in a drafty old barn? And on top of all that, the Messiah comes as a helpless little baby! He can't walk or talk, much less take on the Roman government. Once he's born, the world has to wait 30 years for him to grow up and begin his ministry. Yes, the whole Christmas story is bizarre and absurd.

In our Scripture this morning, Mary sings praise to God. In the verses just after where we stopped, she illustrates the kingdom of God, saying that "God has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty." Again, these ideas seem normal to us, because that's how we talk about God. But before Jesus started telling people to love their enemies and that the first would be last, the Israelites didn't have this upside-down view of God's reign.

Mary's hymn here is so subversive, so controversial that it launched a medieval celebration called the Feast of Fools. During the first week of the year, the high-ranking clergy switched places with the lower-ranking clergy. Someone in the congregation was elected the King of Fools. Everything in church was twisted around. Clergy wore their vestments inside-out, held books upside down, and swapped their glasses for orange peels. This upheaval of the normal order served to remind the congregation that God's kingdom will overturn our culture. God's way is not the world's way. I think we need a little foolishness this morning. (Pause to remove robe, wearing something obnoxious underneath.)

So why don't pastors dress like this anymore the first week of the year? Unfortunately for us, this festival got entirely out of hand. People took advantage of this day to break all sorts of rules, and not just to point out that God's way is different. People were cross-dressing, drinking to excess, even gambling on the church altar. As you might imagine, the high church officials deemed this behavior blasphemous. So at the Council of Trent in 1431, they prohibited the feast

using the strongest terms and penalties possible. The result of which is that we don't have a Feast of Fools today.

And maybe that's too bad. Maybe we need a little foolishness to help us remember that God has his own way of doing things. In 1 Corinthians, Paul talks about being foolish for Christ. He says that in order to follow Christ, he and his friends happily go hungry and live homeless. When people hate them or beat them, they treat those people only with kindness. Ultimately, Paul writes that the whole point of God's foolishness is the cross. Think about it. If you tell a dying person that they can live forever because some guy named Jesus was killed, that person will think you are crazy. But if you know the whole story of Jesus' birth, life, death and resurrection, the foolish message of the cross is life itself. Paul says, "For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength."

God's way looks foolish to those who are entrenched in the way of the world. A businessman with great power thinks it's foolish to send the Messiah as a vulnerable newborn. A socialite with great connections to important people thinks it's foolish to send the Messiah to be born to a nobody girl from a nobody town. God acts in these seemingly foolish ways to point out to us what's really important. To help us see that God will turn this world upside down.

Now that's enough foolishness for today. (Put robe back on). Because a little foolishness can help us to see things in a new way. But too much foolishness and we forget the key message for today. And that message is that God is coming. Maybe to someone we don't expect. Maybe to a place we don't expect. Maybe at a time we don't expect. But God is coming. Amen and amen.