

The God-Bearer (Isaiah 9:2-7; Colossians 1:13-20; Luke 1:39-55)

A seminary professor was fishing with his junior-high son.¹ Since the fish weren't biting, they had lots of time to talk. So, seemingly out of the blue, the son asked, "Dad, what is the toughest thing God ever tried to do?" His dad was caught by surprise and thus threw the question back saying, "What do you think it was?" The son laughed and said, "Even though you're a minister, you don't know much about God, do you, Dad? Well, since taking science in school, I thought the creation of the world might be the hardest thing God ever tried to do. But in Sunday School we got to talking about some of the miracles, like Jesus' resurrection, and so then I thought that might be the toughest thing God ever did. But after thinking some more and talking to others, I decided that no one knows God really well. So now I think that the toughest thing God ever tried to do is to get us to understand who he is and that he loves us." The father could simply reply, "Son. I think you're right. That is the hardest thing that God ever had to do...."

There's a lot of truth to this boy's observation. The Bible covers hundreds of years of God's constant effort to try to get us to understand who he is and that he loves us. Hard, unending work indeed. God created people and placed them in the Garden of Eden, but they disobeyed him, hid from him, refused to trust in his loving kindness. He chose one man--Abraham--to work through him and his descendants, but that didn't work too well either. Same thing when God sent judges, kings, and prophets. God even told one of his prophets, the Prophet Hosea, "Go, love a woman who has a lover and is an adulteress, just as the Lord loves the people of Israel, though they turn to other gods and love raisin cakes" (Hosea 3:1). Through this visual parable, God was trying to get people to understand that even though they were being unfaithful to him, negligent of him, and unkind to him, nonetheless, he continued to be faithful to them and love them. But again, the example and words were met with unseeing eyes and deaf ears. Finally, God decided to send his Son Jesus as Emmanuel, God-With-Us, to help us understand who God is and that he loves us. As the Gospel Writer John expressed it, "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life" (John 3:16).

¹ The father is Al Lingren, professor at Garrett Evangelical Seminary, as recounted by King Duncan, Collected Sermons, www.Sermons.com.

But even after the advent or coming of Jesus, the perfect example of the good nature of God, the perfect example of God's love for us, gaining entrance into our minds and hearts has continued to be hard work for God. And this is essentially because he doesn't force himself on us.

Perhaps you heard about the man who had been suffering with a headache for several days and finally went to see a doctor. The office nurse greeted him gruffly and then ordered him, "Go into that dressing room, take off your clothes, put on this hospital gown, and then come out into this room to wait for the doctor. He'll be with you in a few minutes." The man protested, "But ma'am," he said. "I really don't need to go through all of that. I just have this chronic headache." To which the nurse answered, "Sir, just do what I say, and do it quickly." And so the man did. When he undressed and came out to the room where he was to wait for the doctor, he discovered another man already sitting there. This man was also wearing a hospital gown. The man with the headache said to him, "This is ridiculous. I don't know what in the world I'm doing in here. This is crazy. I just have a headache." And the other man answered, "You think you've got problems. I just came in here to deliver the mail!" Now that nurse had power, and she enjoyed using her power to get people to do what she wanted them to do. But God's not like that. God waits for us to look for him, to see and to hear him, and then to invite him into our lives.

God seeks to come to us through the pages of our Bibles, and he seeks to come to us through nature. But he also seeks to come to us through each other. Our gospel lesson for today speaks of how important we are in God's difficult work of making himself and his love known. Our gospel lesson for today speaks of how God seeks to use us as his instruments and how he therefore patiently waits for us to help him show others who he is and how much he loves them.

Let's look again at the story of Mary to better understand. Mary was a young woman, anticipating a rather ordinary life, but she was open to God. Thus she perceived God speaking to her, telling her that he loved her, that he wanted to be born in her. And one of the first things Mary did was to go visit her cousin Elizabeth. And Mary testified to Elizabeth about the God she carried with her in what is really the very first Christmas carol, a song that has come to be known as "The Magnificat." Mary sang, "holy is his name.

His mercy is for those who revere him from generation to generation." Mary told Elizabeth the good news of the nature and love of God, who seeks to lift up the weak, the lowly, and the poor, reversing their fortunes.

Friends, today's gospel story isn't just about something that happened two thousand years ago--something that happened to Mary. To a large extent, it's a story about something that is repeated over and over again in the lives of those who are open to God--those who, like Mary, believe that "nothing will be impossible with God" and exclaim, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." It's the story of those who are willing to bear God and carry him to others, that they too may know God's nature and love.

Mary's story, therefore, is a call to all of us to also become God-bearers. If God can be born in a poor, unmarried, country girl, then God can be born in us as well. He can be born in our minds and in our hearts, so that we can then carry or bear him to every person we encounter. Thus every person we encounter may come to know God and his love, realizing for themselves that God's agenda in the world is to be a loving, comforting, healing, empowering presence, giving sight to the blind, binding up of the broken hearted, and freeing the oppressed. We are to lift up the Christ, bear him to the world. How many lonely, frightened, confused, guilt-ridden people there are. How many people there are who have a difficult time forgiving themselves or others. How many there are whose lives feel empty and meaningless and hopeless. How the world needs God-bearers.

In Tom Brokaw's book The Greatest Generation, a story is told of a woman named Mary Wilson. When the Allies got bogged down in Italy during World War II, they attempted a daring breakout by launching an amphibious landing on Anzio Beach. The Allies got pinned down at the landing site and came close to being driven back into the ocean. Mary Wilson was the head of the 51 army nurses who went ashore at Anzio. Bullets ripped through the tent as she assisted the surgeon. It became so dangerous that arrangements were made to get all of the nurses out. But Mary Wilson refused to leave. She later said, "How could I possibly leave them. I was a part of them." Mary was nicknamed "The Angel of Anzio," for she carried God with her, the God who would never desert the men. Mary Wilson was a God-bearer.

Some time ago, at the Annual Conference of the Methodist Church in Sierra Leone, West Africa, those who attended had to walk past a little girl, about eight years old, who was begging. She was in rags and dirty; her hair was matted and knotty. The pastors entering the conference building either ignored her or asked her to go somewhere else. They didn't want to be distracted from focusing on the important work of the conference, the important work of the church. But a lay member of the conference, a woman, found a bucket and some soap. Although she was dressed in a beautiful traditional tie-dye gown, this woman pushed up her sleeves and gently, lovingly gave the eight-year-old girl a bath and washed her hair. She put a new dress she had bought on the child, and then she washed the clothes the child had been wearing and spread them out on the bushes to dry in the sun. Inside the conference center, hundreds of pastors and laypersons debated how to best do Christ's work. But outside, quietly and without notice, one woman bore God to the little girl. And this woman, this God-bearer, helped God in the difficult work of revealing his nature and his love to that child.

One last story--about a reluctant God-bearer. Chuck Colson was in Raleigh, North Carolina, on Christmas Eve 1985. He was there to speak in several nearby prisons. He turned on CNN to catch the late news, and he saw Mother Teresa with her arms around two emaciated young men. Because they were in the last stages of AIDS, they had been released from prison to enter a home maintained by Mother Teresa's order. When a reporter asked "why we should care about criminals with AIDS," Mother Teresa answered that the young men had been created in God's image and deserved to know God's love. Colson wondered how she could embrace men who were dying of such a deadly virus. He knew that he could never have that kind of courage. The next morning Colson preached to several hundred women prisoners. And as he was getting ready to leave, the warden asked if he would visit Bessie Shipp, an AIDS patient in an isolation cell. "It's Christmas," explained the warden, "and nobody has visited her." Now, in Colson's defense, in 1985 we didn't know as much about how AIDS spreads as we do today. So we can understand why Colson began making excuses. But then he remembered the love-filled face of Mother Teresa, and he remembered her words about how the boys had been created in God's image and deserved to know God's love. So Colson agreed to visit Bessie Shipp. He found the petite young woman in her isolation cell reading a Bible. Colson asked, "Bessie, do you know Jesus?"

"No," she answered. "I try to. I read this book. I want to know him, but I haven't been able to find him." Colson took one of Bessie's hands and prayed, and at the end of the prayer, she looked at him with tears flowing down her cheeks. Colson said it was a life-changing moment, for Bessie and for him. Bessie died three weeks later. Colson said he shudders when he thinks how close he came to avoiding that visit, to not being a God-bearer for Mary Shipp.

The message of this season of Advent is that instead of keeping his distance, God is very close--on the pages of our Bibles--in nature. And, God is waiting to be invited into our very lives. He won't force himself on us though. He waits for us to exclaim, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." He waits for us to invite him to be born in our lives and to bear him to others, so that they too may know him and his love. Amen.

-- Terry Chamberlain Diehl; Hickman Mills Community Christian Church; December 20, 2009