

## What Shall I Give?

I Samuel 1:20,27-28,2:1-10 (Hannah's song)

Luke 1:39,46-56 (Mary's song)

Given on the Third Sunday of Advent at the Union Church of Bay Ridge © 2008 Rev. Mary Speers, Pastor

"Christmas won't be Christmas without any presents," grumbles Jo at the beginning of *Little Women*.

How many of you know the story? The book was written a hundred and fifty years ago, by Louisa May Alcott, a daughter of Bronson Alcott, a famous Transcendentalist (the New Age of the 19c), based on her own family life, and set during the Civil War, which was over by 1868 but still fresh and painful in the memories of its readers.

In the book, the four sisters are feeling the crunch of the postwar depression, one of the most dismal periods in history of our nation, a time of prolonged mourning for Abraham Lincoln and deep disappointment with Presidents Johnson and Grant who followed, a time of carpetbagging and payback, impoverishment for many and unbridled profiteering for a few, and even for the families fortunate enough to have their fathers and sons back, a lifetime of living with, and compensating for, grave and sudden disabilities.

What happens next in Louisa May Alcott's book (which, by the way, was an instant runaway best-seller, is still in print, and has had, let me see, two talkies that I know about, and was there a silent picture before that? Remember Katharine Hepburn as Jo—the Louisa character, the one who says, "Christmas won't be Christmas without any presents.")?

The family have decided—with all the sadness and need in the world, and with their father far away in the war, perhaps never coming back—not to have presents this year, at least not in the usual way.

They decide instead to follow that even older classic, *Pilgrim's Progress*, which in Louisa May Alcott's day was, and had long been, the best-selling book behind the Bible, and although it had been written in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, was then still in print, but—well, have any of you ever read it? As far as I know it has never been made into a movie, and try as I might (it was written by the great Anabaptist-Reformed English preacher John Bunyan, and the grand old hymn "He Who Would Valiant Be 'Gainst All Disaster" comes from it)—anyway, try as I might, I cannot manage to slog through it.

But there *is* one gift under the girls' pillows on Christmas morning, "a little crimson book: she knew it very well, for it was that beautiful old story of the best life ever lived, and Jo felt that it was a true guidebook for any pilgrim going the long journey."

And here today we have arrived at the beginning, or one of the beginnings, of that story: the annunciation of the angel to Mary, and her response to that announcement.

It's based on the Song of Hannah, which you also heard, and if you heard similarities, that was on purpose: Luke meant you to hear them. Just as Louisa May Alcott used a much-loved, much-quoted, and actually, in her day, still much-read, earlier book as a framework for her story, so, scholars tell us, does Luke.

And Luke writes an anthem of such beauty, and such good news, that it has been set to music and sung by countless choirs since there was music in churches. *Magnificat anima mea dominum, et exultavit spiritus meus*.....I hear Bach because I've sung it, but the tradition goes back a thousand years before Bach, probably, and Arvo Pärt wrote a postmodern one, and for all I know someone, someplace, is writing one now.

*Et exultavit spiritus meus*...and my spirit has rejoiced in God my savior...Mary is rejoicing (and you'll hear a lovely version of the medieval Five Joys of Mary this afternoon) in the gifts God has promised to give, not her alone, but all people. And here are some of them:

*Quia fecit mihi magnam qui potens est*...for the Mighty One has done great things for me. That's the first gift: *memory*. Without memory, we cannot have *gratitude*. What are the great things the Mighty One has done for you this year? And how many of them had to do with how many possessions you have?

*Et misericordia timentibus*...the second gift is *mercy*: the compassion God has for those who know their own humanity and throw themselves on God's mercy, and the mercy we are capable of when, through memory, we stay connected with that truth, and because of it, remain humble and grateful.

*Fecit potentiam in brachio suo*....He has shown strength with his arm, he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts: have we not been watching the collapse of greed, and yes, it has been good in our sight, until...we are finally finding out the ways in which "trickle-down economics" *does* work...seems that when times are hard, it's the hardship that does trickle down, or rather it thunders down like an awful torrent. This is when we need most those gifts of gratitude and mercy. I am not making light of this.

Nor do I make light of the next:

*Deposuit potentes de sede, et exultavit humiles*....He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly. How many idols have fallen from their pedestals? We can start with OJay, but bigger idols than that, and also our local idols, right in our own church family. People have been falling off pedestals left and right, and we are confused and hurt and angry. How dare our idols have feet of clay?

But on the other hand, whether you just fell off or you got pushed, whether you knocked an idol off its pedestal or it just fell off all on its own – well, idols do make such a good target up there on their pedestals. Anyone who’s made the transition from romance to marriage can attest to that. And here at Union Church, idols have been falling off their pedestals all over the place.

People don’t do well being idols, or, in the long run, worshipping them. People don’t even feel comfortable up on a pedestal. God didn’t make us to worship idols, or to be idols, and uncomfortable as it is to fall off a pedestal and take the blame for doing so, that’s one of our greatest gifts in this family this Christmas. I mean it.

Because Christmas is about God becoming human. I thank God for the gift that now at last, maybe, we can all be human with each other, and that we have the church to practice humanity and forgiveness in, because maybe we didn’t do such a good job of that in our families, and here is our second chance. We’re going to need those gifts in a merciless world that has a very short memory, a world in which “you’re only as good as your last picture,” in the next few months and years.

That, in fact, is what Christmas is all about. That’s the real Present: God became one of us, God became human, God didn’t want just to be a cold, hard, authority figure in some remote place: no, the Word became Flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and...overwhelmingly inconvenient truth.

Christmas, the Feast of the Incarnation, is about... *Presence*.

And people will continue to fall off pedestals. We have so much hope for our new Administration, and yes, sooner or later, somebody will fall off a pedestal in Washington, too. It’s happened before...remember Ulysses Grant?

So what do we do about it? *Presence*. That’s right. We keep showing up. That’s the gift of *faithfulness in adversity*. That’s what real love is. Did God stop loving us when we sent Jesus to the cross? And there’s one more thing we can do, one more thing that memory and mercy and gratitude and faithfulness enable us to do—and it’s something the angels can’t: only we humans can do it, because unlike the angels, we humans have bodies.

In Louisa’s book, here’s what happens to those March girls on Christmas morning:

“Merry Christmas, Marmee! Thank you for our books. We read some and mean to every day,” they cried in chorus.

“Merry Christmas, little daughters! I’m glad you began at once, and hope you will keep on. But I want to say one word before we sit down. Not far from here lies a poor

woman with a newborn baby. Six children are huddled into one bed to keep from freezing, for they have no fire. My girls, will you give them your breakfast as a Christmas present?"

And of course they do.

*Esurientes implevit bonis, et divites dimissit inanes...*...He has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent empty away....we can do these things in a bodily way, give the gift of health and life in the name of Christ, the greatest life ever lived, and it does feel like a miracle: when we serve others, when we really know the heart of another, take part in the life of another, our own hurts seem so much less.

Have you never noticed the giving spirit in even the poorest of the poor? How the people least able to get around give the greatest gift of their presence especially at Christmas time? How the people who think the least of themselves give in ways that the rest of us can barely imagine?

We are made to give of ourselves, as God did, as God does, hearts, minds, bodies, and spirits, and the best news of all is that God has given us that gift, and the proof is the Present underneath the wrapped-up exterior of each one of us, the Baby about to be born in our hearts today, tomorrow, Christmas day and every day.

What shall I give him, poor as I am? If I were a shepherd, I would give a lamb. If I were a wise man, I would do my part: what can I give him? Give my heart...gratitude, mercy, faithfulness, presence, love—*especially* when others are being unloveable. Why? Because if we have learned no other lesson from the Greatest Life Ever Lived, we pray we can learn that one.

Amen.