

“Leaving Room for Surprise”

Micah 5:2-5a; Luke 1:39-45

Fourth Sunday of Advent: December 20, 2009

A homily preached by Rev. Dr. Ivan H.M. Peden

MUMC, Thomasville, NC

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Over the years I have listened intermittently to a program called *A Prairie Home Companion*. Garrison Keillor has been the writer and host of this Minnesota Public Radio program for many years. Keillor spends some time on the program reporting the news and talking about the people of a small fictional Midwestern town called *Lake Wobegon*.

While trying to find out more about Keillor and his program, I came across a droll remark that Keillor had made in a magazine interview. He had been asked if there were any Christmas customs celebrated in *Lake Wobegon* that would benefit other communities. He replied: “The custom of postponement, I think, is one that everyone can benefit from.” The interviewer asked, “What’s that?” Keillor said, “Well, retailers want Christmas to begin somewhere in October, but that would be the death of it. I think that what people can do to preserve Christmas is not to do anything about it until the last minute. I think it should be a small, last-minute feast day. It should be celebrated with some spontaneity, not like the invasion of a small country.”

My interpretation of Keillor’s point is that the way we have contrived and contorted the keeping of Christmas through planning and programming what we should do, when we should do it, and how we should do it has stripped our celebration of this Christian festival of almost all spontaneity. It has left little or no room for surprise – one of the most exciting and enriching dynamics of life. As you know, I’m not against rituals and traditions that help to express and sustain the meaning of Christmas, but I am hard-pressed to come up with the things we do and customs we observe to capture the element of surprise that is central to the Christmas story. The only idea that comes to mind and one that is not even remotely close to the story of the nativity of Jesus is the surprise element we have preserved for children about when and where Santa comes!

When we read the gospel account of the preparation for and birth of Jesus Christ we are struck by the element of surprise. John the Baptist’s parents, Zechariah and Elizabeth,

were surprised by the news of Elizabeth's conception. So surprised and doubtful was Zechariah that he temporarily lost his ability to speak! Elizabeth rejoiced but was profoundly surprised upon hearing that her cousin, Mary, was expecting a child. Naturally, Mary was greatly surprised by the angel Gabriel. Wouldn't you be? Joseph was surprised when an angel appeared to him in a dream. King Herod was surprised when wise men appeared at his palace asking where they would find the new king of the Jews. Why hadn't his advisors alerted him of the existence of a potential rival to the throne?

Shepherds – quietly watching their flock one night – were surprised when suddenly an angel of the Lord appeared to them and announced the birth of Jesus. They were further surprised when a whole army of angels appeared and sang God's praises. After paying Mary, Joseph and Jesus a visit in the stable, the shepherds rushed to tell their friends what they had seen and heard. Their friends were surprised ...perhaps even a little skeptical! We just can't get away from the surprise element in the birth narrative of Jesus ...yet it seems to be a dynamic that we pay little attention to in our observance of Christmas.

Let me not forget the poor, often much maligned, innkeeper in Bethlehem who was surprised, too! Who can blame the innkeeper? After all, Joseph had failed to arrange for a room in advance. To be fair to him, however, in those days there were no such things as cell phones and "call ahead" reservations! Speaking of the innkeeper, reminds me of the familiar and humorous story about the innkeeper in a children's nativity pageant.

Many of you may have heard this before but I love this story and never tire of hearing or re-telling it. In fact, I have heard Garrison Keillor re-tell this story more than once since I believe it has its origins in the Midwest. Whenever Christmas pageants are talked about in a certain small town in the Midwest, someone is sure to mention the name of Wallace Purling. Wally's performance in one annual production of the nativity play has slipped into the realm of legend.

Wally was nine that year and in the second grade, though he should have been in the fourth. Most people in town knew that he had some difficulty keeping up with the other kids in the class. It may have been cruel to say this, but he was described as big and clumsy, slow in movement and mind. At school his peers, all of whom were smaller than he, had trouble

hiding their irritation when Wally would ask to play ball with them or any game, for that matter, in which winning was important. Most often they'd find a way to keep him out but Wally would hang around anyway not sulking, just hoping. He was always a helpful boy, a willing and smiling one, and the natural protector of the underdog.

Now to the story about the Christmas pageant ... Wally had fancied the idea of being a shepherd with a flute in the pageant that year, but the play's director, Miss Lumbar, assigned him to a more important role. After all, she reasoned, the Innkeeper did not have too many lines and Wally's size would make his refusal of lodging to Joseph more forceful.

And so it happened that the usual large, partisan audience gathered for the town's yearly extravaganza of beards, crowns, halos and a whole stage full of squeaky voices. No one – on or off the stage – was more caught up in the magic of the night than Wallace Purling. They said later that he stood in the wings and watched the performance with such fascination that from time to time Miss Lumbar had to make sure he didn't wander onto the stage before his cue.

The time came in the pageant when Joseph appeared – slowly, tenderly guiding Mary to the door of the Inn. Joseph knocked hard on the wooden door of the beautifully painted set on the stage. Wally the innkeeper was there, waiting. “What do you want?” Wally asked, swinging the door open with a brisk gesture. “We seek lodging,” Joseph said. “Seek it elsewhere,” Wally declared vigorously, looking straight ahead. “The Inn is full.” But Joseph persisted: “Sir, we have asked everywhere in vain. We have traveled far and are very weary.” Looking properly stern, Wally raised his voice and said: “There is *no* room in this Inn for you.” Joseph persisted: “Please, good Innkeeper, this is my wife, Mary. She is heavy with child and needs a place to rest. Surely you must have some small corner for her. She is *so* tired.”

Now, for the first time, the Innkeeper relaxed his Stoic stance and looked down at Mary. With that, there was a long pause, long enough to make the audience a bit tense with embarrassment. “No! Be gone!” the prompter whispered from the wings. “No!” Wally repeated automatically, “Be gone!” Joseph sadly placed his arm around Mary who rested her head upon her husband's shoulder and the two of them started to move away. However,

departing from the script, the Innkeeper did not return inside his Inn. Instead, Wally stood there in the doorway, watching the forlorn couple walking away from him. His mouth was open, his brow was creased with concern, and his eyes were filling unmistakably with tears. And suddenly the Christmas pageant became different from all the others. “Don't go, Joseph,” Wally called out. “Bring Mary back.” And Wallace Purling’s face grew into a bright smile. “You can have my room!” As if he almost could not believe what he was saying, he repeated: “You can have my room!”

Some of the town’s folk thought that the pageant had been ruined. Yet there were others....many, many others...who considered it the most meaningful of all Christmas pageants they had ever seen. Was it because it conveyed a sense of surprise? Was it because of Wally’s spontaneity that reminded everyone of the spontaneity of the Word that became flesh and dwelt among us?

My message today is quite simple: leave room for surprise in your observance of Christmas. Find ways to preserve the spontaneous and unexpected dynamics of Christmas. It may not be too late to do something about it now, even though there are only 5 days left before Christmas is finally upon us. Perhaps a more insistent need is to apply this lesson of leaving room for the surprise visit of God in our lives to what we do and how we live *every* day, not only on Christmas Day. Let us leave room for a daily surprise declaration that God loves us. The greatest surprise on Christmas Day and on any day of the year is just this: that the birth of Jesus Christ declares that God loves us.

Let’s try our best in the next few days not to crowd our Christmas or create a contrived Christmas that squeezes out the element of surprise. I hope the unexpected, almost unwanted, snow that came on Friday helped us all to slow down for long enough to reflect on what we are doing, or more accurately not doing, to leave enough room in our plans and preparations for Christmas so that we do not fail to hear God whisper, “I love you ...yes, you! I’m aware of your weakness, your failure, your hurt, your stress, your sin ...that is why I sent my Son ...that is why I reach out my hand of love, of healing, of forgiveness, and of peace.”

Leaving room for God’s surprises in our lives may change the world as we entrust our

lives to Christ as Savior. And, if not the world, God's surprises will certainly change us. If Christmas, in Keillor's opinion – which in this instance I also share – should be celebrated with spontaneity, then let me close by posing this question: “What is holding us back from beginning our observance of Christmas by welcoming God's surprising love again in our lives?”

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.