

"David, Jesus, and Rudolph"

2 Samuel 7:8-13; Luke 1:26-33

Highlands Presbyterian Church, Columbus

December 24, 2017—4th Sunday of Advent—Rev. Ronald Botts

Our Old Testament reading for today retells the story of how David was picked to be king of Israel. On the surface of it, his selection would seem to be most improbable.

It happened this way. Samuel was instructed by the Lord to go and search out a man named Jesse from the town of Bethlehem. Now Jesse had a number of sons and it was from among these that God indicated a new king would come.

So Samuel went out and found the man, Jesse. When he saw the first son, a large and imposing man, Samuel thought that surely he was the one intended. But God indicated that this son was not the chosen one and reminded Samuel that outward appearance is of no concern when one is looking for the heart.

Jesse then called his second son to come forward, but again the Lord said he was not the one. Nor the next, or even the one after that. All in all Jesse had seven sons parade before Samuel, but none had the Lord's hand on him. So Samuel asked if this was all the man's sons, to which Jesse relied, "There remains yet the youngest, but he is keeping the sheep."

So the last son was called in from the fields and Samuel could see immediately that this youngest was a handsome lad, though just a shepherd. This time, however, the Lord indicated that the king-to-be was before him and Samuel acknowledged the Lord's favor by anointing David right there in the presence of his family. From that time on the Spirit of the Lord came upon David.

Today's scripture also relates a further promise of God to make from David a continuing lineage. And the Lord said, "When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your ancestors, I will raise up your offspring from you, who shall come forth from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be a father to him, and he shall be a son to me."

Here was David, taken literally from the pasture and relocated to the palace, a most unlikely candidate to be head over all the Israelite people; yet, that was God's intention. Further, he was promised that from his offspring more kings would come, with reference to a special one in the future who would be like a son to the Lord.

Our second reading from Luke is almost a continuation of this story. It tells about a young woman and the divine message she receives: "Do not be afraid, Mary," the voice said, "for you have found favor with God. You will conceive... and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."

How strange and incomprehensible this must have been. Why would she of all women be picked to bear such an important child? Maybe there was some mistake.

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Mistake? It surely seemed like a mistake when Robert May was called into his boss's office in 1938. May was an advertising writer for the Montgomery Ward company. He was only a small cog in a gigantic enterprise. So he was taken aback when his supervisor said to him, "May, I want you to write a folk story for a catalogue booklet this year. We've been buying these little Christmas books for children each year, but now we are going to put out our own to save money. So write us a good story."

Robert May was taken aback that such an important assignment was being given to him, but he didn't have much enthusiasm for it. There were other more important things on his mind. His wife had recently been diagnosed with cancer and their child would increasingly need him. No, he couldn't generate much interest in the task. It was simply an additional burden that he would have gladly relinquished if he had been in a position to do so.

May paced around his small cubicle of an office and began to worry. He had to come up with an idea, and soon. But where would he get his story? Unable to concentrate downtown, he decided to go out to the zoo. It was a place he felt calming. There he walked around and around until finally an inspiration came to him.

He returned and wrote a hasty draft of a story and took it immediately to his boss. The man read it, shook his head, then handed it back to Robert. "Too childish," he said.

So the copywriter dejectedly put the draft back into his briefcase and went home for the weekend. He knew he had to succeed or his job could be in jeopardy. But whenever he thought of his family, and how they depended upon him, he knew he couldn't accept defeat without at least trying.

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Trying and re-trying had also become a way of life for the Bishop of Myra, a city now located in Turkey. With many great problems looming, everyday brought new challenges to this devoted man.

Life wasn't easy for Christians in the early church, and bishops increasingly were targets of harassment and persecution. For this particular church leader there was increased danger during the reign of the Emperor Diocletian. Christians were scapegoated and attacked for their faith. Rome carried out this policy with a vengeance starting in the year 303.

Yet just ten years later, however, religious toleration was instituted by the new emperor, Constantine, and life changed dramatically for Christians. A new day was at hand. Their faith had carried them through the dark night of trouble.

The Bishop of Myra survived as well. Never one to exalt himself in his position, he simply wanted to be a loyal servant of the Lord. Yet, he became well known, both near and far, because of his genuine caring about people.

The bishop was especially concerned with the poor and the powerless. Young girls at that time were particularly at risk of being consigned into lives of prostitution because their families had no means to provide for them. The bishop managed to raise dowries for many young women and so kept them from ruined lives. It was no secret that he also took special delight in bringing small gifts to the children he met along his city's streets.

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Streets in Chicago that Friday were bustling were bustling with children and adults as Robert May headed home. He resolved he would try again to pull his story together. He detoured via the zoo and once more watched the animals in their cages. Perhaps he, too, felt like he was in a cage with no way out. Slowly an idea began to evolve.

He returned home, rewrote the story, then read it to his sick wife and child. He poured a lot of himself and his feeling of failure into the animal character of his story, but the tale ended happily on a twist of fate. He was uncertain as he began to relate the story to his family, but when he saw the sparkle in his child's eyes and the smile that his wife managed amid her pain, he knew that he had found his story.

With some fearfulness May took his composition to the boss again, and this time he shook his head approvingly. Montgomery Ward had its story for the catalogue that year. It was given the title "Rudolph, the Red-Nosed Reindeer." One man's suffering gave the world a lasting Christmas story. Robert May might have been an unlikely candidate to contribute such an enduring tale to the world, but perhaps his boss's assignment brought out the writer's true potential.

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Potential was something the Bishop certainly saw in the little children of Myra who always seemed to flock around him. He saw past dirty faces and thin bellies, ragged clothing and shoeless feet. He recognized the miracle of life in each one of these little ones. The small presents he gave them may not have been worth much in actual money, but they brought much hope and happiness into an otherwise bleak world.

This obscure bishop by the name of Nicholas, a man who would have thought himself an unlikely candidate for later sainthood, was one whose penchant for giving has lasted far beyond his own lifetime. He elevated the presenting of gifts into an expression of love and caring for others. St. Nicholas didn't forget the children of his town; now children worldwide still remember him, though not with a bishop's robe and staff.

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More than anyone else, at this time of year, we remember the Christ Child. Born in a rough stable in Bethlehem to a young woman in an out-of-the-way place, this singular event changed the world for all time. Like the shepherd David, he was chosen to bring glory to the name of God. Jesus never became temporal king of Israel as some expected and wanted; yet, he was destined instead to become the King of Kings.

Our stories today remind us that God always chooses the manner and means of carrying out divine work, to bring a message of love and salvation to the world. God can use anyone. God can use even us. Don't scoff at the thought that God sees undeveloped potential within you. Don't discount the possibility that God has a plan and purpose for your life that is now only becoming clear.

You're certainly not Jesus or David. You're not St. Nicholas or Mary the Holy Mother. Why, you're not even Rudolph but you are God's child, loved and accepted and full of promise. Through gifts provided you, you have gifts to share back with life. So this Christmas take some time and discover them anew or find them for the very first time. Then put those gifts to good use.