

Joining With Jesus to Build the Kingdom

As we prepare to celebrate Christmas this week, our Gospel for this Fourth Sunday of Advent is the story of the Visitation. In this story, Mary goes to visit her cousin, Elizabeth, who is also an expectant mother. She remains with her and helps her, and it's this beautiful scene of how our faith is active. Mary literally brings Jesus to Elizabeth and her unborn son John the Baptist who we are told leaps for joy in the womb of his mother. A good thing to think about is how, like Mary, we can be transformed by the Christmas event by thinking of Jesus' presence in our lives, and also of how like Mary we bring Jesus to one another.

Terese Hayden, a mom who's also a writer from Kentucky, I think is reflective of where a lot of people are at in terms of being very busy. She found her life was built around her full-time job, three kids, and her husband who worked the midnight shift. And she also found that life was getting her down. She reflected that "there had to be more to my life than paperwork, potty training, and ridiculous factory schedules." As she was so busy, she says she could not help this nagging sensation inside of her that was this thought that said to her "there's something else you should be doing." It refused to stop begging for attention.

As providence would have it, it was around the time she had this thought that she picked up her parish bulletin, and found that a retreat was offered for an upcoming weekend. And so she decided to check this out, and signed up for it with the hopes that God might be able to answer the restlessness within her.

The retreat that weekend was held in a convent. She walked onto the grounds, and immediately felt a sense of peace, walking past the towering brick buildings and large oak tree that had a bouquet of branches that reached for the sky like hands lifted in charismatic prayer. Terese stopped under the tree, and she says the holiness encompassed her.

Not too long after this, she navigated her way to her room. Laying her suitcase on her bed and surveying her surroundings, she noticed there wasn't a ton of there to keep her busy or distract her. What she did find as a bed, a desk, a Bible and a dresser with a crucifix hanging on the wall. It seemed pretty bleak to her, and her initial line of thought was that perhaps simplicity and her would not be all that good of a match.

The first night, she crawled into bed and warmed herself in the blankets, trying to be warm. Initially the quiet of the convent made her feel uncomfortable, as she was pretty used to the noise around her at all times, but in spite of being a bit uneasy, she gave into her fatigue and quickly fell asleep.

That night though, she had an experience. She says she awoke, and looked up at the ceiling and saw a ghostly figure of a boy standing as tall as the ceiling. A thin band circled his head like a leather halo, holding his long, curly hair away from his face. His body was wet with sweat. His head tilted upward with an affectionate gaze aimed

toward heaven. Teresa says that in the second it took her to open her eyes, she was infused with knowledge, a holy resume that introduced her to her spiritual intruder. In her words, "This is Jesus, the Carpenter's Son. He has been working long grueling hours helping his father build." It was then, she says, that she heard the words, not audibly, but inside of her that said, "it's hard work building the Kingdom."

Teresa sat up in bed and brushed her hand over the figure, but found that he was gone. Confused, she laid back down and tried to assimilate what had just happened. She stared at the dull gray wall that had been the backdrop of that mysterious visitation, her heart pounding like a hammer, as she wondered "if that was Jesus, then why am I so afraid?"

What she realized was that much like the disciples, fearful of Jesus in the boat, what she had was a holy fear. Jesus had scared the devil out of his disciples, and was scaring her too in a good way. And so she laid back down to get some rest.

The next morning, she went to Mass with this encounter on her mind. As the Mass started, she was distracted by her thoughts, but prayed to herself, "Lord, was that really you last night?" When the time came for the homily, the priest paused slowly at the front of the church, and after the pause, began the homily "Jesus the Carpenter's Son. What a beautiful name for Jesus." Needless to say, Teresa was stunned. She felt as if God were trying to tell her something, feeling goose bumps about her. The phenomenon reoccurred in waves throughout the homily, not ending until the end of Mass. And as she drove home, thoughts of Jesus traveled with her on the drive. She was trying to understand why He would appear to her as the Carpenter's Son, but then it came to her. She asked herself what exactly does a carpenter do, which is to build things. And then, what does Jesus the Carpenter do? The answer is He builds not so much things, but rather that He builds lives.

And so as soon as Teresa got home, she sat down at her computer and wrote about Jesus, the Carpenter's Son, the builder of lives. On a whim, she submitted what she had written to the editor of her diocesan newspaper. To her surprise, he liked what she wrote so much that he invited her to write a monthly column for the paper. But this was just the start of the call for her. A short time later, she was asked to be a cantor and music minister at her church. Once again, she heard the call and started to sing. One thing led to another and suddenly she had plenty to do; the floodgates opened and she found herself just going with the flow.

That retreat for Teresa was more than 30 years ago, and what she's found is that not one day has gone by since then where she has been idle. She always finds something worthwhile to do for the Lord, be it writing, singing, visiting nursing homes, or teaching the catechism to her grandkids. There are times when she wants to quit, but in those moments, she says, she wipes the sweat from her brow and remembers that Jesus once told her that it's hard work building the Kingdom of God.

For us to build, we first need the tools. And this is why the contemplative part of our lives means so much. In our busy lives, we need time to encounter God; to listen to Christ; to spend time in prayer or silence. Trying to incorporate this into our lives each day will give us both the “work order” and the tools we need to go about building God’s kingdom. The “work order” could be trying something new; looking at how we parent or where we volunteer; or looking at being more involved in the parish. God is always inviting us to do different things at different moments in our lives; our job is to listen to Him.

We then go about the mission. Mary felt called to go and visit her cousin, and this would have been a difficult journey, and there was plenty of work to do. As Teresa found too, she was busy after that retreat, but it was a good kind of busy. In the plans that God gives us, we may find there’s a lot of work to do, but it makes such a difference. From volunteering to the actions of love we do for our families to the gift of our time we give to others, little by little we make God known in our world, especially through building lives like Mary helped do for Elizabeth and like we do for one another.

Have a great week as you prepare for Christmas with you and your loved ones, but, as you do, never forget what a great gift the world has been given in you. Your life means so much; that’s why you are here. And when you do acts of love for this world for others, like Mary, what a difference you make in bringing people closer to God through the gift of love.

God bless and Merry Christmas,

Fr. Paul