

"Christmas Underdogs"
Christmas Eve, FPC, 2009
By Rev. Dr. Glenn Hink

Underdogs....."A year of the underdog".....so a news article was reflecting on this year as it draws to a close. There was Susan Boyle, the woman who first appeared on the English television show "Britain's Got Talent." She wowed international audiences singing "I Dreamed a Dream" from Les Miserables. The song is a beautiful lament about dreams that will never be. Susan Boyle dreamed a dream of being a singer as she sang karaoke in a local pub. Her dream is now coming true, as in November she had a CD recorded and released.

The "buzz" in the movie world this fall has been about the movie "The Blind Side." It is a true story about Michael Oher, a homeless African-American teenager who comes to be part of a very Southern, white family in Memphis. With his new family's care and encouragement he breaks away from a culture of despair and drugs, overcomes a huge deficit in his education, and discovers football. Michael Oher went on to be an All-American football player at the University of Mississippi, and a first round draft choice of the Baltimore Ravens. He's now the starting right tackle of the Baltimore Ravens.....a long way from the streets of Memphis.

Underdogs.....as the city of New Orleans continues the long recovery from the devastation of hurricane Katrina, the New Orleans Saints football team is 13 wins and 1 loss. Not so long ago their few fans wore bags on their heads to games, with "Aints" written across them. Now they carry the hope and pride of a city trying to rebuild.

Underdogs.....this year the first African-American president of the United States, Barak Obama, was sworn into office, and Sonia Sotomayor became the first Hispanic Supreme Court justice.

I don't know if we really know the story of more underdogs in 2009 than in other years. But I do know we like the story of the underdog. Most people know the story of Rudy, the 5'8", 165 pound young man, who through courage and perseverance overcame a lack of size and ability to play on the Notre Dame football team his senior year. I've cheered Sylvester Stallone's character Rocky, the overwhelmed boxer who with "heart" becomes the world champion. And if you saw it, how could anyone forget the 1980 USA hockey team that beat the Russians in the Olympics and won the gold medal. I can still hear the chants of "USA, USA, USA." All of them are stories of underdogs.

"In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered." (Luke 2:1) This also is the story of underdogs. The Christmas story has its big guys; Emperor Augustus, Quirinius the governor of Syria, Herod the

Great, Annas the high priest. But the story is really not about them. Instead, it's about a carpenter from Nazareth, named Joseph. And there's a young woman, pregnant, but not married, named Mary. And the story happens not in Rome, or Athens, or Ephesus, but in the little village of Bethlehem, easily lost in the all the noise and busyness of nearby Jerusalem. There's no palace, but the hospitality of a family. There's no bed, but the warmth of a simple manger. And a boy is born.....snuggled, held, sleeping, crying.....like so many other baby boys.....and named Jesus. It's the story of quiet love, hopeful faith and simple praise.....a story of God's grace for the world that comes through underdogs. I always see a great truth in the 11PM Christmas Eve service, as the quiet, simplicity and gentleness reveals the way of God in the world.

In a busy world of bigger, brighter, better....we can miss the quiet plans of God....the way of God's salvation for the world in the lives of under dogs. In the Christmas song "A Strange Way to Save the World," Joseph ponders this strange way of God. He says,

“Why me, I’m just a simple man of trade
Why Him, with all the rulers in the world
Why here inside this stable filled with hay
Why her, she’s just an ordinary girl
Now I’m not one to second guess what angels have to say
But this is such a strange way to save the world.”

Indeed it is.....but it's God's way; sacredness in the simple, power in gentleness, truth in stillness, the kingdom of God in the lives of the under dogs in the world.

The nativity story is told in some places in big ways with unlimited resources. The goal is to experience the real thing, whatever that is. Planning and practice have gone on for months. The shepherds are professional actors. Real sheep, camels and cows make their way to the large stage. Mary, Joseph and baby Jesus look like models. A flashing star is three stories high, and angels fly suspended by cables. A 100 voice choir sings the "Hallelujah Chorus" from Handel's "Messiah." There is the thunder of sound, the flash of light, the movement of animals and actors.....the audience hardly knows where to look. It is a massive spectacle.....which lacks only one thing; the glory of the Lord. There is no mystery. It has been good entertainment. But as folks leave no one is pondering anything in his or her heart.

The nativity story was also once told in a small church. Church kids filled the parts. The inn keeper at Bethlehem was played by a high school boy for who "awkward" was an apt description. He was quiet, polite and kind.....but somewhat awkward; awkward in manner, awkward in social relationships, awkward in appearance as his rapid growth pushed the limits of his clothes. He was well liked, but easy to

overlook. When Mary and Joseph came to the inn, he stood there.....awkwardly...
....slumping a bit as the couple made their request for lodging. He then dutifully recited his one line, "There is no room in the inn." But as Mary and Joseph turned and walked wearily away, the boy continued to watch them with compassion. And in that moment it was not a play.....not entertainment.....but life. And in grace, though not part of the script, the boy startled himself, the couple and the audience, by calling out after them, "Wait a minute. Don't go. You can have my room." It was not a massive spectacle. But there was mystery. There was the glory of the Lord. And folks did leave pondering something in their hearts. (Something is About to Happen, Tom Long, p.45)

The way of the Christmas story.....the way God's of salvation.....the way of God's kingdom.....it comes in ways that are surprising, quiet, gentle and simple. And while the responsibilities of politicians, government, political parties matter.....the strange way of God comes in the faithful ways of all the under dogs.....an ordinary couple, a bath robed innkeeper, and me and you.