

“Surprise in the Ordinary”
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First Presbyterian Church of Sharon
By Rev. Dr. Glenn Hink

It happened again this Christmas season. Perhaps you read about it in the news. In the Naperville suburb of Chicago the Salvation Army had a surprise. A gold coin was discovered in the donation bucket outside Casey’s Foods. Amidst the ring of bells, the bustle of shoppers, the shine of lights, the music of carols and the noise of traffic.....an extra-special gift appeared. The surprise was a South African Kruggerand, one ounce of gold, wrapped in a \$1 bill. The giver remains anonymous. When questioned the bell ringers say they didn’t notice anything or anyone unusual. But it did unusually lift the spirits and the hope of folks in the Salvation Army there, as donations have lagged last year. It has been that way in the Naperville suburb of Chicago for the past 5 years. Something special happens in something that has become as ordinary as a red bucket and a ringing bell. Generosity still gives a surprise.

This Christmas season as I have pondered the Christmas story it has been the surprise in the ordinary that has caught my attention. I have been thinking about the subtle ways of God; the quiet story behind familiar story. Mary was a humble, young girl, and Joseph a simple carpenter, both from the backwater village of Nazareth. They were outside the circles of the rich, powerful and religious. In fact, I am certain I could not have picked them out of a crowd. And yet, the salvation plans of God for the world are brought forth into the world through these ordinary people of faith.

In that day the Jewish temple was a wonder to behold. Recently completed under the order of Herod the Great, some of the foundational stones were more than 40 feet long, and weighed over 100 tons. Polished marble covered the 35 acres of flooring in the temple, and the front of the central sanctuary was covered in gold. Travelers arriving to Jerusalem from the East during the day had to shield their eyes from the brilliance of the sun reflecting off the gold. (The descriptions of the temple come from Dr. Ken Bailey’s 2011 Christmas letter). Access to the temple was increasingly limited as visitors went farther inside; gentiles, Jewish women, Jewish men, priests, and the high priest. Anyone who trespassed a boundary could be killed. A religious system was practiced in the temple that proclaimed the holiness of God. And it demanded ceremonial holiness the closer a person got to the “holy of holies,” where the glory of God was believed to dwell.

In contrast at Christmas we hear a different story about God. God comes subtly as a gold coin wrapped in an ordinary \$1, not in the brilliance of shining gold. God

comes surrounded by love, not power. God comes amidst ordinary people, not priests practicing holiness in the temple. God comes to a stable, as our nativity scenes tell us, or to an ordinary 1st C Jewish home, as Dr. Ken Bailey suggests.....not to marble floors and Roman columns.

And while the temple had walls and warnings and rules to keep people back according to a rigid practice of holiness.....the Christmas story tells of love that welcomes strangers. The shepherds would not be welcome in the temple. Their ways of life out in the fields made them unclean. And yet, they are the ones to whom the angel appears. And they are the ones who hear the angelic chorus of praise. And they are the ones who go to Bethlehem “to see what has taken place.” The salvation of God in Jesus is for them. Those who thought they were strangers and outcasts from God are welcomed as friends.

The “Magi,” the wise men, they too will come. They might be foreign priests from another land. Or they might be Arab sheiks coming in from the desert. But whoever they are, they most certainly would be people who could not enter the temple. And perhaps they were people who did not know God and God’s plans of salvation. But here they are, following a star, now included and worshipping the one who will bring God’s plans of salvation for the world. Perhaps there is more surprise in the familiar Christmas story than we know.

A friend told me this story. It is a quietly surprising story. It’s a story about a rose.....a rainbow rose. At a wedding reception roses in rainbow colors decorated the tables. The bud of a single rose had the colors of blue, purple, orange, red, yellow and green. Amidst the expensive festivities of the reception, these roses were one of many things that were the talk of the guests.

Late that night as the reception wound down, my friend was helping clean up. Tables were cleared, trash was picked up, and the floor was swept. The rainbow roses that decorated the tables had been taken home by the guests. But as my friend swept the floor he saw one rose under a table, discarded and forgotten. He picked it up and looked at it closely. He was amazed. I later saw pictures he had taken of the rainbow rose on his cell phone camera. He asked, and the manager said he could keep the rose.

After clean up the rainbow rose was taken home and put it in a bud vase. My friend’s mother was in the hospital, so the next day he brought it as a gift. She too was amazed at the colors. It was a dash of wonder in her gray hospital room. She was pleased, and my friend was pleased. But what happened next no one had planned.

The duty nurse saw the rose and passed the word. Soon nurses from various floors were making their own sojourns to room #615 to see the rainbow rose. It was like shepherds from the fields, and Magi from distant lands. It was a surprise in an ordinary room, on an ordinary day. It was beauty and wonder for regular folks. I think everyone smiled more that day.

A gold coin wrapped in an ordinary \$1 bill.....the sojourn to see an overlooked rainbow rose that brings joy to the floor of a hospital.....the salvation of God in the midst of ordinary people. Love wrapped in the ordinary.....rainbow beauty that is for all....God's love and glory among us.....there is a story here more true than we know....and more real than all the glitter of Christmas. It is God with us, and God for us, and God among us. Sometimes we just have to pay attention to see the surprises in the ordinary. Merry Christmas.