

Preparing Our List

Luke 2:8-15; Isaiah 61:1-2

December 4, 2011

As a kid I remember that the best day of the year, not including birthday and Christmas Day, was the day the Sears and Roebuck "Wish Book" came in the mail. I would immediately go through that catalog memorizing it from front to back. I couldn't memorize my "8s & 9's" on the multiplication table but I could tell you the exact page that a toy was on and everything you wanted to know about that toy. I was a toy connoisseur. I would start my Christmas list early and I would edit that list over and over and over.

Christmas is a time for lists, we all start making our lists and checking them twice. The lists are plentiful: gift lists, grocery lists, travel lists, decoration lists, Christmas card list, a list of your holiday lists, a list of holiday activities and parties to attend, and if you host a party there is always a guest list.

There is an old Family Circus cartoon where Dolly is sitting with her baby brother on her lap and is telling him the story of Christmas. She is telling him something like this: "Jesus was born just in time for Christmas up at the North Pole surrounded by 8 tiny reindeer and the Virgin Mary. Then Santa Claus showed up with lots of toys and stuff and some swaddling clothes. The 3 wise men and elves all sang carols while the Little Drummer Boy and Scrooge helped Joseph trim the tree. In the meantime, Frosty the Snowman saw this star...."

That was quite a guest list Dolly dreamed up wasn't it? Dolly got me thinking about the guest list for that first Christmas and who was on that list. We get a clue of who was invited from the gospel of Luke.

And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."

Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests."

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about."

God's Guest List

The shepherds probably would not have been on anybody else's guest list except God's. They just didn't fit into society all that well. At one time they were very well respected but over the years their reputation had plummeted

until they were on the outside looking in. And yet, here they are at the top of God's guest list. Not only were they invited, they got a gold embossed invitation and the red carpet treatment.

If the guest list for that first Christmas were left up to us and we knew then what we know now first of all there would have been a change in venue. To welcome the long awaited Messiah, the King of Kings, the very son of God, well a dirty, smelly, cramped stable just would not do. Our list would have been full of high brow, affluent VIPS and dignitaries. If we were to compare God's guest list with our guest list it is pretty clear that we would not have been on the same page; we would not have had the same people on it as God.

Actually God complied that very first Christmas party guest list 800 years before Jesus' birth and announced the Good News of who was invited through the prophet Isaiah. We heard that guest list in our Advent reading earlier, hear it again, "The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me, Isaiah said; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn."

That's not typically the folks who are usually on the top of our lists is it? The folks on God's list make most of us uncomfortable. And yet, sometimes, God chooses to move through those people to break down the walls and barriers that separate us.

The Pastor of the Church of Heavenly Rest says one of his parishioners is an angel; his name is Joe, and Joe is a street person. Joe refuses to stay in a shelter. He sleeps in doorways and maintains a careful routine covering his neighborhood in daytime, or when the weather is cold, he sits in the church. Joe is dirty, dresses in rags, never washes, Joe smells. Whether he is alone or around other people Joe talks to himself, muttering as he goes about his daily activities.

A few years ago about a week before Christmas, the church held a Christmas party after the service, and the church members were in the parish hall right off the sanctuary enjoying cookies, coffee and wonderful fellowship. All of a sudden, out of the sanctuary rose a magnificent voice, singing, "O Holy Night." It was a trained professional voice, incredibly beautiful, and everyone listened, awestruck, then rushed into the sanctuary to see who was there. They found Joe kneeling before the crèche cradling and singing to the baby Jesus.

The Bible says that sometimes we entertain angels unawares. Maybe Joe was one of those angels. I don't know but I think at Christmas we're reminded to treat everyone, no matter the time of year, with dignity and love. Who knows who might be an angel in disguise? We're called to treat every person as if they were Jesus. You see, like the shepherds and Joe, they just might be one of those people on God's guest list.

That First Christmas there was the Sound of a party.

That very first Christmas party wasn't a somber event. The Shepherds came. And Mary and Joseph celebrated. And there was music at the party. The angels sang. Oh, did the angels sing!

Today the music of the Christmas party is drowned out with advertising jingles, the sound of cash registers, the cries of, "I want this and I want that", and the empty promise of "Buy more stuff and then you'll be happy." The true sounds of Christmas are being drowned out by the world. And sometimes we get to feeling like we're just not doing any good. So why should we, the church, the faithful, keep singing the songs of joy, hope, peace and love if nobody is listening?

There once was a Christmas party in a crippled children's hospital. Fred Rogers (Won't you be my neighbor Mr. Rogers) and his pianist, Johnny Costa, were entertaining the children. A little boy who was suffering from cerebral palsy asked to sing a carol. The child had a difficult time speaking let alone being able to sing.

When he began to sing "Silent Night," the sound was wavering and shaky. The boy not only had difficulty in pronouncing the words of the carol, but he shifted key on every note. As he began to painfully mutter through "Silent Night," the song was so impossibly bad that it was nearly unrecognizable and everyone shuddered and tried to shut out the terrible sounds.

Johnny Costa, however, quietly began to provide background music for the little boy's solo. On the portable keyboard, Costa wove beautiful chords with each note the child sang, and no matter how off-key the line was, he brought beauty and harmony into the child's singing. Costa seemed to anticipate where the little boy's next croak would be on the scale and worked the boy's notes into a beautiful performance of "Silent Night."

A lot of what we see and hear during the world's Christmas frenzy is like that little boy's solo, terribly out of tune and tempo with what God originally intended. But as the church, as the faithful we're like Johnny Costa, we weave the beautiful chords of the songs of joy, peace, hope and love quietly in the background. If it were not for us the church singing the song of the faithful

and redeemed, all the entire world would hear is the uncertain croaking of the barkers selling their wares in the circus they've made of Christmas.

You and I are called to share the beautiful song of that first Christmas that allows the world to hear the true message of Christmas. The message that tells us that the party God is throwing doesn't require us to bring any presents. Instead, when we come, we receive the greatest gift of all. We're called to keep singing because at some point in time, there's a moment of silence or quiet. The cash registers quit ringing. The crowds have all gone home. The doors to the stores are locked and silence blankets the world. And then, the beautiful strains of God's message of goodwill and peace on earth can be heard. That can only happen as long as we keep singing and remain faithful.

Just a few days before Christmas two ladies stood looking into a department store window at a large display of the manger scene complete with baby Jesus, Mary, Joseph, shepherds, wise men and animals. Disgustedly, one lady said, "Look at that, the church trying to horn in on Christmas!" She sure was a grinch!

The world seems to have forgotten whose party it is. But you and I, we are a part of God's family and that means that we've not only been invited to the greatest party of all, but we've also been asked to help host the party. We're in charge of providing hospitality and lovingly reminding the world about the true reason for the season.

This Advent season while we are preparing our hearts and our lists for the grand celebration may we also prepare our lives to sing the songs of joy, hope, peace and love through acts of kindness, words of encouragement and appreciation; public displays of affection through handshakes, hugs, and embraces of acceptance and love. In doing this our actions proclaim the true and beautiful message of Christmas goodwill and peace on earth.

Amen