



LUTHERAN
CHURCH OF **HOPE**

Pastor's Update

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By Pastor Merv Thompson

"May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all." (2 Cor. 13:14).

Way back in medieval times when I was a student at Luther Theological Seminary, I was privileged to sit at the feet of the legendary and beloved Dr. Alvin Rogness, president of the institution. Along with his administrative duties he also taught one course each year to seniors, a course which focused on the practicalities and nuances of being a parish pastor. Rogness knew first-hand of what he spoke, unlike many academicians, for he had served as a highly effective pastor in a variety of places; Duluth, MN, Sioux Falls, SD., Ames and Mason City, Iowa.

A favorite subject of Dr. Rogness was that of preaching. Again his words had authenticity, for he was a gifted preacher and author. I still remember some of his chapel sermons.

Speaking of chapel sermons, a favorite story has been passed down from generation to generation. One day he received a letter from a former student who wrote, "Dr. Rogness, I wanted to let you know that I repeated one of your chapel talks almost verbatim last Sunday at my church. It seems as if you could have one of three reactions.

First, you could be deeply offended that I would plagiarize from you without giving you adequate credit. Secondly, you could be most flattered that I thought enough of you to repeat your sermon. Or thirdly, you can write me and let me know from whom you stole the sermon." Of course that would never apply to any preacher here at Hope, every word we preach is original, creative, and unique to that moment. Right.

A favorite line of the good doctor was in regards to preparing a sermon. "Whenever you prepare to preach," he would say, you should hold the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other." Text and context. If you only have the Bible in front of you, you can become so heavenly that you are no earthly good. If you only have the newspaper, you might only be a social commentator with no word from God. Text and context must be together.

I took his words to heart and so ever after I have tried to read several newspapers on a regular basis, as well as some magazines. There is always some context which will inform the text. For instance, I saw an article recently in the New York Times which became such a moment for me. Written by Steven Lee Myers, originating from Kiev, Ukraine, it seemed to be a Christmas text in disguise. Let me quote:

"The most striking and most potentially significant public rebellion against President Leonid D. Kuchma and his chosen successor in last Sunday's contested election began silently." What a beginning to an article. Does it pique your interest and imagination like it did mine? The rebellion began silently, what rebellion, how could it be silent? I thought rebellion was accompanied by thousands of people in the streets, shouting and carrying on. But here is silence. The article continues:

"Last Thursday morning, Natalia Dimitruk, an interpreter for the deaf on the official state UET-1 television station, disregarded the anchor's report on Prime Minister Victor Yanukovoch's claim of a victory, and, in her own small inset on the screen, began to sign something altogether different."

What her amended message to her small deaf audience was revolutionary, "the results announced by the Central Election Committee are rigged, do not believe them. Our duly elected president is not Yanukovoch, but rather the opposition leader, Victor Yuschenko." Her final words highlighted what a risky and courageous act of defiance this was when she signed, "I am very disappointed by the fact that I had to interpret lies, I try not to do it anymore. I do not know if you will see me again."

The article summed up the meaning of this dramatic action, "Ms. Dimitruk's act of defiance became a part of a growing revolt by a major source of the government's power, namely state television. This very brave woman finished her rebellion by walking

out of the studio and joining other journalists on strike, a strike which has become a watershed in Ukraine's struggle for freedom."

All of this points to another woman some 2000 years earliest who also challenged the overwhelming and abusive power of the state. She also took part, to quote the earlier article, "in the most potentially significant public rebellion. Of course this rebellion was against the powers and principalities of this society as well as those even beyond this world. This young woman announced by her acts of defiance that she did not accept the lies and fabrications of the world, but that she was an apostle for the truth.

She said she would no longer explicate the lies of the world. And of course living in the social and political climate of the times, she also would have been realistic to say, "I don't know if you will see me again." King Herod and his legions are not going to remain passive in the face of this ominous new threat.

Her name was Mary. Most likely she was a very young woman, with no power or influence. Her only support seemed to be her much older cousin Elizabeth. But one day her breath is literally taken away when an angel shows up with the message, "Do not be afraid Mary, you will conceive and bear a son and you will name him Jesus. He will be called the Son of the Most High. Mary did not know what to say, and it seems as if no words would ever be able to express her feelings. All she can do is to say, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord, let it be with me according to your word."

We have often ignored Mary. Even today with a renewed emphasis on Mary Magdalene, we still have a tendency to ignore Mary. Many commentators have depreciated her by saying she was too young, too uneducated, too female, and too powerless to be taken seriously. Because Roman Catholics deified her, Protestants who wanted to be as different as possible from everything Catholic tended to denigrate her.

Later on she would sing her famous song, the Magnificat, but at this moment of mysterious pregnancy, she finds no words to express her experience. Later on, as chronicled in the movie "The Passion of Christ," Mary is depicted as a very wise, caring and

loving person. But she acts primarily in silence, the Spirit often moves in silence.

Mary in the Christmas story continues her silence. Animals, shepherds, wise-men, angels all have a voice, but Mary remains perfectly quiet. We are told that she treasured all that had taken place and she pondered all of this in her heart. In silence. But in giving birth to the Christ-child she gave a sign that everyone could see, a sign that truth would supplant lies, and peace would take the place of violence. She gave birth to the most revolutionary figure and the most revolutionary message in the history of the world.

Never underestimate the power of God. Never underestimate how God can take the most humble and powerless person and fill them with the spirit of power. Ms. Dimitruk and Mother Mary helped to change the world, and much of this was done silently. Our lives also can be a sign of that rebellion, the message that nothing can ever separate us from the love of Christ.

The hymn writer summarizes this so eloquently, "How silently, how silently, the wondrous gift is given. So God imparts to human hearts, the blessings of his heaven. No ear can hear him coming, but in this world of sin, where meek souls will receive him, the dear Christ enters in.

Oh holy child of Bethlehem, Descend to us we pray. Cast out our sin and enter in, be born in us today." That is the key, something new is being birthed, and we are called to receive that new gift. You don't even have to be noisy about it, for in the silence you can sign the presence of God.