

December 11 – The Winter Rose

Carol: Lo, How a Rose E're Blooming

Luke 2:4-7

As we move into our third week of Advent using carols to help us understand the meaning and challenge of Christ's birth, we look at "Lo, How a Rose E're Blooming." It begins, "Lo how a Rose." The rose is an ancient symbol of Christmas. There is a beautiful legend of a little shepherd girl named Madelon. As Madelon tended to her sheep one cold and wintry night, Wise Men and shepherds passed by Madelon's snow-covered field bearing gifts for the Christ Child. Following, Madelon saw the Magi present gold, myrrh and frankincense to the baby...even the humble shepherds had brought fruits, honey and doves to give to the baby...but Madelon had nothing, not even a simple flower for the Newborn King. Standing outside the stable where Jesus had been born, poor Madelon wept, wishing that she had a gift she could carry to the infant. A watching Angel, taking pity on Madelon, caused the snow at the feet of the small girl to vanish, thus revealing a most beautiful white flower whose petals were tipped with pink, formed by the Angel from the tears which had fallen from the eyes of the little shepherdess. Overjoyed, Madelon presented her gift at the manger of the baby Jesus...her gift of the Christmas Rose.

The rose has long been a symbol of Mary, symbolizing her purity, beauty and fragility. It is said, her beautiful faith seemed to even humble the angel Gabriel. She also represents the fragility of humankind. The rose, beautiful as it is, also because of its thorns, is an image of pain. It reminds us of the pain Jesus will experience and the pain that will pierce Mary's heart as she watches her firstborn die. In the carol, Mary's delicate love and the child's fragile splendor are both compared to a rose.

Think about how those two images of love seen in a rose intertwine in our thoughts for the season. Language often fails us when we try to describe tender beauty—and what could be more beautiful than young Mary making herself fully available to God, risking her secure future with Joseph. Think about Mary feeling sickness and fatigue as the new life inside her grows, suffering the pangs of labor hearing the baby's first cry, then cradling him, nursing him, counting his fingers? God

could not contain God's self in heaven but came to earth as a baby, as intimate as a child at his mother's breast, as close as the breath you just took, the beating of your heart in your chest, even now. Lo, how a rose ere blooming,,when half spent was the night.

We are also reminded that Isaiah foretold it, this birth. Matthew, when he writes his Gospel, makes it clear, Jesus is the fulfillment of prophecy but so much more. In the prophecy found in Isaiah it talks about a virgin or young maiden who will have a child to be named Immanuel. It was a curious name, unprecedented in those days, more a sermon than a mere name, bearing the profound truth of God with us. When Isaiah gave this prophecy, Israel was in dire straits. The Babylonian armies were threatening. To talk only about a child born sometime way in the future that would have no bearing on their current situation would be meaningless. Obviously, he meant some woman who was currently pregnant would give birth to a child, name him a funny name, and somehow this would be a symbol of God's presence with them in this difficult time. Later, after their defeat, captivity in Babylon and return, this and many other of Isaiah's prophecies came to be associated with a hope for a Messiah who would save all.

We are reminded that the connection between mother and child is so important for this story of God's salvation. Mary's love, Mary's nurturing, feeding and all the rest is needed for Jesus to grow. The story of Jesus' birth is a story about a partnership between God and Mary and through the ages, a story of our continued partnership with God where both sets of love are needed. Isaiah shares the hope that God is with us, God never leaves us to our devices, and reminds us that we are never alone. Yes we are loved, but also God reminds us we need to love God and Jesus would say the best way to do that is by loving others.

The last phrase I want to lift up is that this birth, this sweet rose of a girl Mary, saying yes to God was all part of a bigger story to "Show God's love aright." That got me thinking, "How often is God's love shown a-wrong?"

We might fantasize of a God who is indulgent, not minding at all how we live. We receive all the benefits of love without accountability. We know what happens with

children when this occurs. We call them spoiled. Such a laid back love on earth by a parent is seen as a lazy masquerade of attentive love. Yet at times this wrong love is how we view God, indulgent, loving, and ultimately uncaring.

Other times we are told God's love is rather stingy—very real but limited, bestowed only on certain folks. From the earliest days of our faith there were those who wanted to proclaim that you had to be in the inner circle to really receive God's love. Without this knowledge you were on the outside. We like this image as long as we can count ourselves as being on the inside! Yet, ultimately such a God is nothing more than humanity at its narrowest. God's love becomes an extension of our bigotry.

Many also want to proclaim that God's love is something that can be earned. Again, this work's righteousness has been decried over the centuries and yet we see it proclaimed in subtle ways. And let's face it. Aren't we weary of laboring away in a culture that is all about earning? True hearts desire mercy and grace. Yes there are many ways God's love is shown a-wrong in the world.

Our challenge is to be in partnership with God, sharing our love as we receive love to show God's love a-right. It is a love that is expansive and freely given but also a love that demands accountability. It is a love that is filled with grace, precisely what Mary gave Jesus. Mary's mothering love of Jesus is emblematic of God's love for all of us. It is close, it is nurturing, it hurts when we hurt and rejoices when we rejoice.

This carol ends with these words: "and share our every load." We are not in this alone. God is with us. But even more, God is encouraging us to share this love with others. As we share other's loads, our loads are lightened as well. As we do this, we extend grace. We remind all of the goodness of God, about what is right about God's love.

A rose, strong, rooted, tough and beautiful, is God's love in each of our lives. Growing up I spent a lot of time with my father tending roses. He was a preacher and so we moved often. Wherever we went one of the first things dad would do in our new place is plant a rose. Sometimes the yard was large and many roses were planted. Often he would go around digging up sad neglected roses on the property, putting them

in a place the sun would do its best, and with fertilizer and love bring them back into glorious bloom. One place our parsonage didn't have a yard to speak of. It was right beside the church, another business on the other side just a few feet away, a parking lot taking up all of the rear and just and a small piece of grass between the house and sidewalk. Yet, soon, dad had created a small bed, enough for one rose. He loved to grow them but even more to share them. Mom would always receive the first blooms of the season but soon, he was sharing them with others. He grew roses to give them away. When I see roses I am always reminded of his generous heart.

Lo, how a rose e'er blooming. God sent Jesus, born of Mary to remind us of God's love, to challenge us to love as freely and openly and to remember we do not have to carry the burdens of life by ourselves.