

The Improbable Truth
4th Sunday in Advent - December 20, 2009
Luke 1:39-45

This time of year, someone always wants to de-bunk, dismiss, or deconstruct Christmas, especially its religious significance. Our local paper recently ran 2 articles about how humanists and atheists cope with the season. Of course, these articles were in the religion section of the paper, where they were guaranteed to be overlooked by the very people whose plight they were sympathetically portraying!

In the front section, though, there was another article telling how humanist organizations are once again plastering ads on buses. "There's probably no god, so relax and get on with your life," one such ad reads. Another urges, "Just be good for goodness' sake." And there's the usual seasonal welter of lawsuits against the display of manger scenes or menorahs on public property.

On TV, in addition to the old and new Christmas classics, you can often tune in to programs devoted to myths surrounding the conception and birth of semi-divine heroes in ancient religions; to the pagan origins of time-honored Christmas customs; and of course to the suppressed "alternative gospels" portraying a radically humanistic, feminist Jesus who either never was crucified, or who, once crucified, was

certainly never resurrected. Articles on similar themes regularly appear in major weekly news magazines around this time of year. Even the most Christmas-spirited person might be forgiven for breathing a sigh of relief when December 26th arrives; the tinsel, decorations, and seasonal music disappear from malls and streets; and the world goes back to basically ignoring Christianity and its message - at least until Easter approaches and a second, though smaller, wave of religious deconstruction washes ashore our consciousness.

Okay, Scrooge, move over and make room for me!

The basic mantra seems to be this: If there are even faint hints of similar stories in long-dead cultures scattered around the globe, then *of course* the stories surrounding Jesus' conception, birth, ministry, death, and resurrection must be mere myths as well. If there are non-Christian revels and holidays around the time of the winter solstice, then *of course* Christians simply plagiarized, competed with, or outright stole them for their own purposes. If a non-supernatural religious story can be told of ordinary people, preferably with a somewhat edgy, against-the-grain quality about them; or, conversely, if a fantasy can be spun about vampires, wizards, Jedi knights, or flawed superheroes, then *of course* they should be lifted up as more authentic, or just plain more interesting than this too-often-told tale of a young *virgin*, of all people; a virtuous older woman; two miraculous conceptions; and

the promise of a God-man born in lowly circumstances. Just the word *virgin* is enough to make some folks snicker and roll their eyes!

Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.

Although I'm surely not the first, I began to wonder: What if there's a theological reason that those stories, myths and legends abound? What if they speak to a deep longing, planted by God himself, for one of those stories to be true? What if the old legends prepared the very soil of the human heart for the planting of the seed which is Christ Himself? What if the fascination some people have with stories of wizards and warriors, superheroes and aliens, is in part based in the deep longing for a Word of power and beauty, truth and life, to burst into our lives from the high reaches of heaven, and to transform us?

Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.

A couple of Christmases ago, one of those de-bunking magazine articles cited research that seemed to indicate that human beings are hard-wired to believe in God or at least some supernatural power. The conclusion was that this was an evolutionary strategy which helped our primitive ancestors to cope with the uncertainties of life - and the certainty of death. But what if that "hard wiring" is also forensic evi-

dence of God's fingerprints on us, touching us with the longing to more fully know the One we may only dimly sense? What if we're hard-wired to long for the *fulfillment* of what those "divine fingerprints" merely promise: that we should see God face to face?

Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.

If you examine the myths and legends of various cultures, yes, you'll find myths of heroes born of the union of gods and mortals. You'll hear stories of gods whose death and rising echoes the natural ebb and flow of the changing seasons. You'll encounter sagas that strain to see a purpose in life that might only be fulfilled beyond the veil of death.

We humans, left to our own devices in a broken and death-shadowed world, try to piece together the face of God from the smudged fingerprints He's left on our hearts; but the only way we can *actually* recognize Him is if He's left an accurate description - or better, an accurate portrait - of Himself. Without that, we'd be like CSI investigators haring off after every reported sighting of a middle-aged guy, average height and weight, dark hair and eyes, medium complexion, driving a beige car, hoping that one of them might have fingerprints similar to the smudges we'd noticed.

And, like many good CSI investigators, we're probably primed to roll our eyes and disbelieve someone who insists that, contrary to every dead-end lead we'd followed, *this* lead is genuine. *This* description is accurate. *This* revelation is trustworthy. Sure, sure, we respond. You don't actually believe that God *really* speaks to people, do you?! Even if He did, it wouldn't be to an illiterate teenage girl from a backward, primitive Semitic culture, now, would it? And God would have something more practical and useful to reveal, wouldn't He, than this promise of a Redeemer - *yeah right, who needs that?!* - who will die - *eeww, that's a bummer* - and rise - *hah, as if!* - to save us from our sins - *give me a break* - and transform us into his Son's blessed likeness - *excuse me, I like myself just the way I am* - so that with that Son, we may call Him Father - *don't even GO there!!* - so that we may live in His Kingdom forever - *forget THAT imperialistic claim* - with all those who have trusted His promises - *that's not very inclusive, is it?!*

Blessed are they who believe that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to them by the Lord.

Every year we're asked, "Did you get what you wanted for Christmas?" Often the answer is yes, even if "what we wanted" doesn't live up to our expectations or breaks down prematurely. We all have a bunch of "what we wanted for Christmas" stashed in the attic, hall closet, or the Men's Brotherhood yard sale room in the church basement!

And when it comes to that *longing*, that sense that there are smudgy fingerprints left by God on our hearts, sometimes we get "what we wanted" there, too. We get explanations, rationalizations, fantasies, legends, and whatnot else. And maybe we discover that it ends up in the hall closet or attic of our lives: not as useful, fun, interesting, or satisfying as we'd hoped. "Be good for goodness' sake; there's probably no god, so relax and get on with your life" is better as a slogan on a bus than a life philosophy. Stories about Jesus marrying Mary Magdalene or studying yoga by the banks of the Ganges are interesting, but they won't sustain us in the valley of the shadow of death. Secular festivities are fun, but nobody's gonna lay down their life for Santa Claus.

The question we *should* ask is, "So, did you get your heart's desire?" Because however unlikely, non-cutting-edge and apparently impractical it seems; no matter how many debunkers take aim; no matter how many people scorn, the fact is the same today as it's always been, and was so famously summarized 1600 years ago by Augustine: "You have made us for yourself, O God; and our hearts are restless until they rest in You." And the gift - the fulfillment of the promise written on our restless hearts - is the baby nestled beneath Mary's heart. *Blessed are they who believed that HE IS the fulfillment of what was spoken to us by the Lord. Amen.*