

In The Trenches

Mary Zablocki, SFO

ORDINARY TIME

Advent is over. Christmas is over. The trees have been put on the curb, the decorations rest in the attic. We, the people of God, sigh deeply and look out our windows and think about Spring.

Spring. Pouring through catalogs, picking out bulbs, planning our gardens, and waiting.

For what are we waiting? For Lent, for renewal, for new life, for the celebration of our Risen Lord. And after Easter, with its glorious spiritual breath of fresh air, we start looking out the windows again. Waiting for summer, for the porch furniture to be brought out, for the kids to be out of school, for slower, more relaxed days and shorter nights.

What is going on here? We spend our lives preparing and waiting, celebrating, cleaning up, preparing and waiting and so on and so on. We mark our lives by cyclical events and milestones and in between, for many of us, we either rummage through photographs of the last celebration, or plunge into preparations for the next.

What about building the kingdom?

What about now?

What about our reason for dragging one foot after the other out of bed on these dark cold winter mornings, our "settling down after Christmas", our passage through silent days and even deeper and darker nights.

How many of us "made it through" the holidays this year? Was it mourning we put on hold? Was it a financial crunch we were worried about, or relatives we weren't sure we wanted to see? Maybe it was a rotten work schedule designed to conflict with our holiday, or an illness that threatened to suck the life out of our spirit and leave us with no strength to enjoy any company at all.

Maybe it was none of these things at all, and our holidays were filled with joy, the best we've ever had. Maybe the liturgies were breathtaking and the church more beautiful than ever. Perhaps this was the year we gave more and asked for less, and we are filled with the afterglow of grace that comes with sharing. Maybe there was an engagement or a new baby or a great job offer to rejoice over.

But now, all the chairs are back in their usual places in the living room, the poinsettias and holly are gone from the windowsills. What do we do now?

We can't just stare out the window at the garbage men collecting the Christmas trees.

We can't just ache our way through our days, counting the minutes between crawling out of our beds, and slipping back under our covers.

No matter how busy and exhausting the holidays were, no matter how full and alive our homes were for the last month or so, it's over. It is ordinary time. And we have ordinary work to do.

This is the time when no one puts in for vacation, no one really has plans, and no one knows just what to expect of the weather. We may have made New Year's resolutions, and we may be faithfully beginning to work toward our goals. But these don't count as ordinary work for ordinary time. These are future things just like planning for Easter and summer. They are good plans and it is good for us to have them. But someone to do the work of Christmas is needed now.

Imagine if you will the shepherds. Here we have some poor boys and men who witnessed a miracle but had to go back to the fields and watch the sheep. They were probably tempted to watch the sky instead, but they had a job to do, and the sky was silent.

What about the wise men? They watched the star of Bethlehem for their whole journey and yet when they finally found the Infant Jesus, they simply paid Him homage and returned home. They came all that way and didn't even wait around to hear what he would say, or see what he would do. Why? Because they had the work of Christmas to do.

And the townsfolk? The innkeeper, the man who fed the Holy Family while they stayed in Bethlehem, the census taker who recorded their names? What of them? Joseph left Bethlehem as soon as the wise men went home, taking Mary and Jesus with him to Egypt. The people of Bethlehem returned to the business of living, the stable was probably swept clean, the census takers called back to Rome.

Ordinary time.

But wait. If the days and weeks following the birth of Jesus were so ordinary, how is it that the stories stayed alive? What was it about the first "holidays" that made a difference in the days immediately following? The shepherds and the townspeople of Bethlehem, the wise men and the Roman occupational forces, the evil King Herod and his court went on doing just what they were doing before Jesus was born.

What they did was no different. They were.

The business of keeping the temple was the same, but Simeon and Anna were different. Simeon was finally able to embrace death because he finally had embraced salvation in the person of the infant Jesus. (Luke 2:29-32)

The shepherds who returned to their flocks must have been changed. After all, they had just seen a poor baby lying in a manger being treated like a king by angels sent from heaven,

(Luke 2:9-14) and gifted with gold and incense and myrrh by wandering strangers from exotic lands! (Matt.2:10-12) That's enough to make any poor shepherd's head spin.

And the wise men. Here we have three travelers of apparent wealth stopping in Jerusalem on their way to the lowly little town of Bethlehem. It was only after they enquired about the child, the king, that Herod took note of them, and invited them to his court. (Matt.2:7-9) Already the work of Christmas was begun. It wasn't the wise men who got Herod's attention it was Jesus!

So, what is our work of Christmas?

It is simply to be changed. We have been touched by the baby in the manger. He gazes upon us, He reaches out to us, He allows us to hold Him. His touch, the very sight of Him, these things change us. Once we experience the Incarnation, we are never the same. Just like the shepherds, just like the wise men, we cannot help but drop to our knees and pay homage.

But just like the shepherds, just like the wise men, we must return home, we must go back to work, we must do the work of Christmas. It is the Incarnation that makes our ordinary time extraordinary. It is the love of God that turns our ordinary work into the building of the kingdom of God.

No matter what our ordinary work is, no matter if we speak or remain silent, walk or remain seated, go out to work or stay home and work, it is the change of heart that makes our work alive.

We are changed.

The manger is cold, we keep the baby warm. The skies are silent, we proclaim the good news. The wise men have taken their camels and gone home, we honor the infant with gifts.

It will never be over as long as we keep it alive, this spirit of Christmas. It is a simple thing really, as simple as waking and sleeping. It requires no specific skills or talents to be a builder of the kingdom, a shepherd works as well as a king. We simply have to allow the change to take place.

So, as we stare out the window at the ordinary world, let us whisper a "Yes" to the gentle baby inside of us, and rejoice as He takes hold of our hearts. It isn't necessary to do anything extraordinary, let us simply begin.