

Dear friends in Christ



St. Francis Episcopal Mission Outreach

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Out of the Least of All

Micah 5:2-5a; Canticle 3 (the Magnificat);
Hebrews 10:5-10; Luke 1:39-55

Last week, when I opened my e-mail, this ad came in over the transom.

This promo easily could have been an exhibit in our seminary's annual show of Tacky Religious Art -- another commercial desecration of Christmas.

For us Episcopalians, "tacky" is one of the worst offenses, a venial sin for sure.

Excuse a minor digression. BUT...This is why I so love All Saints Day. They haven't figured out yet how to monetize it. How much All-Saints schlock have you seen on TV with dancing chipmunks and harmonizing toilet bowl scrubbers?

In any case, here is -- the Christmas promo. A Hot Deal Directly from the North Pole. Yes, folks there actually is a North Pole...in Alaska, near Fairbanks. And those fine citizens milk it for all it's worth this time of year. Actually, Christmas 365 days a year up there.

Well, here's the special. You can order up your Certified Letters from Santa. Each piece printed out on Fine Linen Paper. Use the special code, "Jolly15," and you'll save 15% right now!

Now you see why I so like All Saints Day. No special letters from St. Francis or St. Peter to purchase from God knows where.

But if you want the real message of Christmas and not a bunch of Santa hoo-ha, let's turn to Mary and her message instead. Her song we call the Magnificat. Magnificat, because God often magnifies the least to produce the most glorious results. Magnifies us when we feel ourselves to be the least, to be of no account.

Magnificat – now here's a promo.

Mary, a woman accounted for nothing in her society. Most men have no idea what that feels like. Though I did get a smidgen of insight into personal nothingness the other day.

I went to the auto dealer for a recall issue. It was early in the morning, cold and breezy. A fellow came up to my car, asked a few questions and put a big number on my windshield. Then I stood by my car as I was asked to do. In the cold. In the wind. And stood. And stood. And stood.

Meanwhile, a number of agency personnel walked by. And walked by. And walked by. It was as if I was invisible. I finally stopped one. As he began to walk away without away listening to me, I asked him, "What am I? A customer or an inconvenience?" It was a little taste of invisibility. In that moment I felt like the "Least of All." Welcome to Mary's club.

Mary, frightened, expecting a child and on her own. Shunned by all in her village. Scared for the child she was expecting. Utterly alone -- How on earth does she tell Joseph? Wanting to shrink into anonymity. So much uncertainty.

But as my friend Mike Kinman said several years ago, Mary gathered up her skirts and burst forth with her full agency. If she was to bear this child, she would not be a shrinking violet. She cut loose with the most radical proclamation, straight out of Israel's prophetic tradition. Pure, unadulterated, terrifying Grace.

She knew in her bones -- this child -- her child -- would turn the world upside down. Mary comes off more like Mother Jones than Mother Teresa. Mother Jones -- a union organizer -- hell-raiser totally in it for her people. As Fr. Mike put it that Sunday, Mary took one step back and said, "Hold my beer and watch this."

"He has shown the strength of his arm, he has scattered the proud in their conceit. He has cast down the mighty from their thrones, and has lifted up the lowly. He has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty."¹

These verses are not the namby-pamby platitudes that pass for many of our sermons in the prosperity gospel congregations, or many mainline churches.

This torrent of righteous proclamation is straight out of one considered to be of no account. Don't give me any portraits of Mary in soft blue pastels, harmless as a cocker spaniel. I want the "Mother Jones" Mary. The "Rosie the Riveter" Mary. The Eleanor Holmes Norton Mary!

It is out of this radical option for the poor that every union organizer is born, has breath. It is out of this radical option for the poor that our economics will find rebirth and our planet a future.

You folks who oppress your labor force, your time is up. Either wages rise and everyone gets a fair shake or no one works. You're shut down. That's the union translation of "the rich are sent empty away."

The candle business that forced people in Kentucky to keep working as the tornado sirens screamed their warnings -- yes, you folks. I'm talking to you. Your workers, at least those who survived your callous indifference -- these workers should take you to court until they have wrung the last penny out of you. You considered them of no account, disposable, less than nothing. And many died. It's ironic that it was a candle business that was an agent of such deep darkness. Don't you think?

Micah has it right when he proclaims, "You, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who

¹ Luke 1:46-55, NRSV.

is to rule.”² Out of the Least of All, God’s righteousness springs up. Like the grass that grows through the cracks, though they spread the asphalt over it.

The high and mighty thought they could plan an insurrection on January 6 under the cover of darkness and anonymity. Overthrow our constitutional government. It is the “little people” who have spied them out – reporters and lowly congress critters who have pulled back the curtain. These are the ones of whom Mary sings in her Magnificat. These are the least of Ephrathah, the lowliest of clans.

They will keep the spotlight of the God’s honest truth on those January 6th seditious malefactors until they are marched off to prison for conspiracy. Yes, the fish rots from the head. Thrown down from their thrones these perpetrators will be. Actions have consequences. There will be plenty of time for God’s mercy when you’re in contrition-mode with a few years behind bars to think about your actions.

Again, it will be the Least of All - Hundreds of strong women and their supporters in this very same spirit marching in the streets – for health care rights, for voter’s rights, for a fair economy. Not going to take it anymore. Going to be the drudge and scapegoat no longer. They are here to scatter the proud in their conceit. A Gospel Action if ever there was one.

This, the birth of one destined to turn the world upside down. All who follow in his path are insurrectionists in the cause of a Love beyond all Love. Sometimes the work has a hard edge – of necessity.

Sometimes it’s a gentle soft touch, soft as velvet, as tasty as a ripe peach just off the tree. In all cases, true liberation from what weighs down.

Jai passed along a wonderful such story from Elizabeth Gilbert -- a story of one of the “Least of All.” A big-city bus driver at the end of a long afternoon picking up exhausted, cranky commuters heading on home.

Elizabeth Gilbert gets the Last Word:

“Some years ago, I was stuck on a crosstown bus in New York City during rush hour. Traffic was barely moving. The bus was filled with cold, tired people who were deeply irritated with one another, with the world itself. Two

² Micah 5:2, NRSV.

men barked at each other about a shove that might or might not have been intentional. A pregnant woman got on, and nobody offered her a seat. Rage was in the air; no mercy would be found here.

But as the bus approached Seventh Avenue, the driver got on the intercom. "Folks," he said, "I know you have had a rough day and you are frustrated. I can't do anything about the weather or traffic, but here is what I can do. As each one of you gets off the bus, I will reach out my hand to you. As you walk by, drop your troubles into the palm of my hand, okay? Don't take your problems home to your families tonight, just leave them with me. My route goes right by the Hudson River, and when I drive by there later, I will open the window and throw your troubles in the water."

It was as if a spell had lifted. Everyone burst out laughing. Faces gleamed with surprised delight. People who had been pretending for the past hour not to notice each other's existence were suddenly grinning at each other like, is this guy serious?

Oh, he was serious.

At the next stop, just as promised, the driver reached out his hand, palm up, and waited. One by one, all the exiting commuters placed their hand just above his and mimed the gesture of dropping something into his palm. Some people laughed as they did this, some teared up but everyone did it. The driver repeated the same lovely ritual at the next stop, too. And the next. All the way to the river."

Out of the Least of All, out of you and me, the coming promise of Christmas is arriving to turn our world upside down. Sometimes with a bullhorn on a picket line, sometimes with the soft strains of a holiday song, sometimes by poem. Or a gentle smile. Maybe a crowded bus.

"He shall feed his flock like a shepherd." In his stead YOU may be the one on the soup line serving up hearty nourishment.

In our land, as a great darkness descends over our democracy, you may be the Paul Revere, sounding the alarm. Up to "trouble, good trouble, necessary trouble." Waking folks up.

In the darkness a light has shined. Now, you are that Light. Let it shine.

This is what Mary's alarming song is all about. Someone of lowly birth coming to kindle the life spark where it had been extinguished, born to set the world on fire. And all of us, of lowly birth -- arsonists for Christ.

That's what this bus driver was, the sheer audacity of Grace, all the way down to the river.

Christ has come. Christ is come. Christ will come again. Light that fourth Advent candle. Amen.