

Expectation: The Ministry of Hope

Isaiah 40:1-11
Mark 1:1-8

December 17, 2017
Faith Community

I have a story for you, about a pastor and his daughter. The pastor is Walter Wangerin, Jr., a prolific author, and his daughter is eight-year-old Mary. The year is 1981.

Reverend Wangerin tells of the Christmas season that year when his church folk went out caroling. There was a certain lady in a hospital who Walter knew would love an impromptu concert by a couple grownups and a whole mess of kids, and so they made their way to Odessa's room, Odessa Williams.

She was nearing the end of a long battle with cancer which left her so very frail and weak, and this would surely be her last Christmas if she even made it that far. She knew it, Reverend Wangerin knew it, and the kids just knew Mrs. Williams was sick.

So into her room they marched, the pastor and choir, including eight year old Mary, and went right to work. They did all the favorites in the way that only little kids can, so very off key and tempo, and so very precious in their awkward innocence.

Odessa, for her part, was thrilled. Even with her frailty she started moving an arm, directing the kids, keeping time with them, smiling peacefully, and before long everyone knew they were on holy ground.

Finally, she reached out and touched each one, and talked to them.

'O children, you my choir.' She said. 'O choir, you my children for sure, every las one of you.'

The kids were mesmerized, especially eight-year-old Mary, held captive by this dying woman who opened her soul to them.

'Listen me,' she said. 'When you sing, wherever you go to sing, I'm there with you. I tell you truly: I alluz been with you, I alluz will be. And how can I say such a mackulous thing? Why, cause we in Jesus. Babies, babies, we be in Jesus, old ones, young ones, us and you together. Jesus keep us in his bosom, and Jesus, no, he don't never let us go. Never. Never. Not ever.'

Mary, the pastor's eight-year-old daughter, was entranced and captivated by this godly woman who by now was energized and animated with a strength beyond her own.

Not long after that Sunday evening, Odessa Williams died. Circumstances being what they were, her memorial service would have to be on the 24th, Christmas Eve. There was no way around it, so on that day her soul was commended to the Almighty God who came to live among us in the person of Jesus. Mary, the pastor's eight-year-old daughter, was there and so very troubled by this turn of events.

Later that same day, as they were getting ready to go to the pageant, in which she was to play the role of Mary, Reverend Wangerin could tell that his girl was struggling, so he said, 'Mary, do you think we should find another Mary.' 'No,' she said, 'I'm Mary.'

And so they headed off, the pastor and the grieving girl, and in due course the pageant got under way. Lines were stumbled upon, roles were played, the congregation was captivated, and Mary's heart was not in it, and of course, her father the pastor watched her closely with his own heavy heart.

At last, there they were, Joseph and a troubled Mary, looking down at a makeshift manger with a floppy doll inside.

And so it happened that while the shepherds kept watch over their flocks by night, Mary went off script. She reached down, took the doll out of the manger, by its toes, got up and walked away, this would-be Mary in a bathrobe with a rag doll, held onto by a foot. Worshipers had a couple moments of uneasy quiet until she returned, empty handed, and the pageant went on as planned, only now Mary had a strangely contented look on her face.

After all had been said and sung and done, father and daughter were in the front seat, quietly on their way home, and Mary finally spoke her eight-year-old wisdom. 'Dad, Jesus wasn't in that manger. That was a doll. Jesus, he doesn't *have* to be in a manger, does he? He goes back and forth, doesn't he? He came from heaven and he was borned here, but when he was done he went back to heaven again, and because he came and went he can be coming and going *all* the time, right?'

Reverend Wangerin knew when to speak and when to be silent, so he waited while his Mary kept ruminating on the day.

She went on to say, 'The manger is empty. And Miz Williams' box is empty too. We don't have to worry that she's too cold 'cuz she's not in there. It's only a doll in her box. It's like a big doll, Dad, and we put it away today. If Jesus can cross, if Jesus can go across, then Miz Williams, she crossed the same way, too, with Jesus.'

'Babies, babies, we be in Jesus, old ones, young ones, us and you together. Jesus keep us in his bosom, and Jesus, no- he don't never let go. Never. Never. Not ever.'

Mary glances over and sees that now it's her dad who's brushing away a tear. She asks why.

'Because I have nothing to say,' was his reply. 'I haven't had words the whole drive home.'

'That's OK Dad. I can talk for both of us.'

Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low....And the glory of the Lord will be revealed, and all people will see it together. For the mouth of the Lord has spoken. (vv. 4-5)

And Reverend Wangerin ends his story like this:

'It was in the fullness of time when the Christ child first was born; it was in 1981 when my daughter taught me the times on Christmas Eve; it's in every celebration of Jesus' crossings back and forth; and it shall be forever- that this is the power of a wise love wisely expressed; it can transform the hardest of hearts, suddenly and forever.'¹

Friends, we have way too much heaviness about us. We mix our visions of sugar plums with fears of falling off fiscal cliffs, and most of all, perhaps, we have images of bright eyed wee ones, hearts filled with wonder, and think of those families in Connecticut on this fifth anniversary for whom wonder long ago gave way to devastation the likes of which most of us cannot fathom.

Friends, this much I know: Mary was right. The manger is empty. The sweet little Jesus boy grew up and in doing so

¹ "The Manger Is Empty: A Christmas Story," by Walter Wangerin, Jr. Christianity Today, December 13, 1985, pp. 20-25.

turned everything around and got into all kinds of trouble in the process.

- He challenged every attitude that kept people stuck in suffocating rigidity and gave hope to people who were courageous enough to stop pretending. The manger is empty.
- He stood up to stuffy religious tyrants who were more concerned with following rules than they were with offering hope to broken people. The manger is empty.
- He turned backward people like Odessa Williams into eloquently compelling witnesses that because of Jesus life indeed can be different and people renewed. The manger is empty.
- He even offers hope to people held captive by peer pressure, soul-sapping busyness, lives measured only by productivity, good looks and intimidation, and challenges us to go deeper, demands that we go deeper. That's because the manger is empty.

Some of us live such shallow lives because we've still got Jesus in a manger. We can control him that way, keep him at a distance like we do with seemingly everyone else, use him as one more tool to get what we want, and in the process live an outwardly successful life, but one that has never satisfied and never will.

Friends, the manger is empty. Jesus grew up. Now it's your turn.