

Green Hill Presbyterian Church
“Treasure”
Thomas G. Speers, III
Advent 4—December 24, 2017

Lesson: Luke 1:26-38

Professor Tom Long tells a story about a game he played in his childhood. “It was a game of the imagination, and if it had a name, . . . it would have been called ‘Where Would You Leave the Treasure?’ The idea was this: Suppose you had a large amount of money, a treasure really, but some unexpected crisis has come up, and suddenly you have to leave the treasure with someone for safe-keeping. You can’t put it in the bank or bury it under the oak tree in the back yard—there isn’t time. The rule of the game is that you have to *entrust* it to someone, some human being. Whom would you choose? The fun of the game, of course, was sitting around in a circle and exploring all the character flaws and virtues of the various possibilities, searching for a trustworthy person.

“‘How about the school principal?’ someone would suggest.

“‘Nah, he’d probably steal it.’

“‘Well, how about the preacher?’

“‘Too risky. He’d probably put it in the collection plate.’

“‘Okay, then, what about your sister?’

“‘Are you kidding? She’d want to split it.’

“And on it would go the search for just the right person to keep the treasure. In the mind of a child, the stakes were high: your whole treasure risked on something as fragile as the trustworthiness of another human being.”¹

Well Professor Long suggests that one way to read the first chapter of Luke’s Gospel is as a divine version of “Where Would You Leave the Treasure?” God was looking for some place in human life to leave God’s treasure, the treasure of Good News, the treasure of God’s own self. Surely someone must have suggested Herod the King; he had lots of power. He was a good politician and even though they are not particularly popular in some circles, good politicians can get things done but we know Herod was not chosen. God has a long history of not choosing the powerful whom you might expect. The second person on the scene in this gospel is Zechariah the priest and he wasn’t chosen either. He might have been a great choice, but he showed himself to be both afraid and unbelieving. And this is where the real surprise comes: God entrusts God’s treasure to someone nobody would ever dream of. God chooses what would have been at that time the weakest of all places: the womb of a woman. This woman responds not with power or fear and unbelief. She responds saying: “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.”

If we had been paying attention, this story would not be such a surprise. The God who chose David over all his older brothers, the God who chose Ruth the outsider from the wrong side of the tracks, the God who chose Isaac the scoundrel, and Joseph the dreamer—all through our history God has been choosing the most surprising people, so if you want to find God appearing in the world today, start in surprising places.

Stephanie Saldaña, wrote a powerful piece in the New York Times this week: “Where Jesus Would Spend Christmas” about the refugees in a camp called Moria near the city of Mytilene on the Greek Island of Lesbos. “More than 6,000 souls fleeing the world’s most violent conflicts . . . are crowded in a space meant for 2,330. The scene is grim . . . The Christmas story is their story more than anyone else’s. It is a story of displacement, in which Mary and Joseph leave their home and give birth

¹ Thomas G. Long, *Where’s the Treasure*, in *Something is About to Happen*. CSS Publishing Company, Inc. © 1987.

to Jesus in strange city. In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus is born at the margins of society, poor and wrapped in cloth and *laid in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn....*

“If we want to imagine the Nativity, we needn’t go farther than the tent of Alaa Adin from Syria, who left his home just days after he married. Now his wife is pregnant, and when I met them they were living in a tent outside of Moria, because there was no room for them inside....

“If we want a miracle, I’d suggest looking at Anwar, who despite crying while recounting the destruction of Mosul, still paused in the middle and offered me a clementine....

“Today, she suggests “Moria is Bethlehem. Those stranded inside are not humans to be disposed of, but Emmanuel, God with us.”² Treasure. One of the places to look for Jesus is amongst the world’s refugees.

Of course, we don’t have to go all the way to Greece to find signs of God’s treasure. One friend told me of a music director he knows who leads a choir that sings in various places throughout the year. They went and sang Christmas carols in the memory unit of a life care facility, as some of us did at Lorelton last week. They sang many familiar tunes and the residents sang along as best as they could. What they discovered after the singing was over, was that one woman in the back who was singing along with gusto, was someone who had not spoken a word the whole time she was in that place, over a long period of years, but the music brought her words back and the staff was overwhelmed with joy. Treasure.

Another friend told me of visiting IHOP, not the one where we gather for Bible study, but another. She saw one of the managers who used to wait on her table and greeted him by name—she’s the kind of person who takes the time to learn your name. He told her about his difficult past; his time in jail; his use of drugs and how grateful he is to have discovered strength with a wife and family and a decent job, and I think I can add with customers who learn your name and celebrate your humanity and worth. Treasure.

One more story, which I can tell because she isn’t here this morning—she’s singing at a church near Philadelphia. Back when our daughter Nellie was not quite one, I was part of a choir that sang Handel’s Messiah. Bessie brought baby Nellie to the end of that concert which she seemed to enjoy immensely. Afterwards, as I was buckling Nellie into her car seat, she smiled at me and said: *Hallelujah*. In my delight, Bessie reminded me that we had repeated that word over and again in the Hallelujah Chorus, but the word stayed with Nellie so that on a number of mornings that following week, the first word we heard from that baby girl was: Hallelujah. Treasure!

Phillips Brooks describes the reality of God’s treasure in his hymn—which we will be singing next Sunday—O Little Town of Bethlehem: *How silently, how silently, the wondrous gift is given! So God imparts to human hearts the blessings of His heaven. No ear may hear His coming, But in this world of sin, where meek souls will receive Him still, the dear Christ enters in.*³ God chooses the most surprising places to entrust God’s treasure. In these holy days to come, keep your eyes open to notice that gift; keep your hearts open to reply: *Let it be with me according to your word.*

Let us pray: O Holy Child of Bethlehem, descend to us we pray. Open our hearts and minds to discover your treasure entrusted amongst the most unexpected people. We pray in the name of Jesus. Amen.

² Stephanie Saldaña, Where Jesus Would Spend Christmas, The New York Times. December 22, 2017. © 2017.

³ Phillips Brooks, O Little Town of Bethlehem, 1868.