

A friend of mine tells the story of a young graduate with a master's degree who dreamed of opening a retreat center, a place of prayer for a community of faith. He yearned to do graduate study in Europe in preparation for this dream. He was a young man with a promise, a vision. But then he unexpectedly stumbled over a homeless man on the street.

The man living on the street had not eaten in four days. He lay groaning on the street in front of the train station. The heart inside this young college graduate with the Master's Degree would not allow him to step aside and walk on. He remembered what he had been taught in church and he went home to get a pot to cook some soup for the man on the street.

He bought the pot and a small, kerosene stove to the street in order to feed the man and the other homeless who gathered. His plans for Europe faded as he kept on making soup for any who wanted it. Along the way, the police arrested this Good Samaritan countless times, taking him to the police station in order to try to convince him that gatherings of homeless were bad for the city.

But he couldn't stop. God had replaced the dream of a retreat center in the mountains with the dream of feeding the homeless in the streets. He could not set down his pot of soup.

That was 20 years ago. Now this man is feeding 1,500 people every day in one location. Four full time volunteers run the program, organizing 40 volunteers a day for the feeding and 15 volunteers a day for a free hospital that offers care for the homeless and those without insurance. Volunteers call in and make reservations months in advance for the privilege of serving the homeless. Passersby on the street stop and ask, "May we do anything to help?" After moving the lunch programs many times in order to accommodate all those who were hungry, the city is building a huge dining hall for this free lunch.

One day a movie star along with camera crews took a turn to volunteer at the feeding program. This movie star was so touched by what was happening with this meal that he asked what more he might do. He wanted to do something significant with his riches. The movie star was asked to build a school near one of the feeding programs. He agreed. He knew that the way to help people live better is through education and he trusted this Presbyterian ministry to spend his money wisely.

This story may sound like a fairy tale. But it is not. It is a true story. My friend can testify that it is a true story in a real town. What large city in the US is this story happening? Actually, it is not a story in the US. The setting is Korea.

But it is a true story of a Presbyterian who had a dream that became radically different when he opened his eyes to a person in need. When this Christian leader helped bring restoration to this one hungry man, he saw another. And then the needs of another. And following this vision, a new and very powerful ministry was begun.

What strikes me about this Presbyterian in Korea is that he had a vision as a young adult to do something important in his life. A vision to start a retreat center. Many folks could have benefitted from a retreat center. He saw a real need. But then this young man did not allow his vision to color over how God had a different vision for his life. A vision which came to him when he paid attention to a person in need and did not pass by. Giving that bowl of soup became something much bigger.

I wonder what vision Mary had for her life. Being a female in that culture, her vision of what was possible had to be limited. It was, after all, the men who did the really important stuff. What could she do? But God had a much bigger plan for her than anything she could certainly imagine.

In these words which Mary spoke which we call the Magnificat, what struck me in reading this text again was the vision that she had for this child. A very unique vision. A vision where the powerful are brought down and where the powerless are raised up. A vision where the poor are filled with good things and the rich are sent away empty. A vision where the promises to their ancestors are kept and restoration is achieved.

During last year's Advent season, as Jeffrey Roberts was driving along Route 7 near Leesburg, Virginia, he was startled by a large DOT traffic sign flashing the words: NATIVITY EVENT AHEAD! Because of the speed at which he was moving around the bend, these were the only words he could read. He thought to himself: "Nativity Event? Now that's strange. Is there a woman giving birth somewhere in the road ahead?"

About a mile further along he saw, not a woman giving birth, but another identical sign. This time he could read the entire message and it exclaimed "NATIVITY EVENT AHEAD! USE CAUTION!" Just beyond the sign was the turn-off for a local church that was hosting a drive-through Christmas Nativity Scene on their grounds. The signs were merely traffic warnings.

Yet, as Jeffrey Roberts noted, they spoke a theological truth that undoubtedly never occurred to the DOT.

NATIVITY EVENT AHEAD: USE CAUTION! The coming of Christ into our lives is a transformative event that can change us. Change our community. Change our world.

NATIVITY EVENT AHEAD: USE CAUTION! Our church structures may not be able to contain God's Spirit.

NATIVITY EVENT AHEAD: USE CAUTION!

Yes, the true hope of our world is in the coming of the Christ, who brings blessings of abundant life; the gift of true love; comfort to our grief; balm to our pain; light to our darkness; life in the face of our death.

It is through the Nativity event that visions of retreat centers are changed into ministries that feed thousands of homeless. It is through the Nativity Event where the rich are sent away empty. Where visions are placed in the hearts and minds of Christians who gather to worship in a country church in York County.

I hope that you and I approach this particular Nativity with the belief that, like Mary, our lives can be changed and we can be a part of the vision she proclaimed that led her to proclaim, "My soul magnifies the Lord." AMEN.

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-Korea story from Mendenhall, Laura, Presbyterian Outlook, Dec. 14/21, 2009

-Final story from Society of St. Andrew devotional for Friday, Dec. 18, 2009

-Text: Luke 1:39-55

-Given: December 20, 2009 in Allison Creek Presbyterian (York, SC)