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Larkspur, California
December 12, 2010

Isaiah 35:1-10; Matthew 11:2-11
“Birth of a Ministry”

John the Baptist appeared in last week’s Advent text at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry. In the story today, Jesus is well into his ministry and John is in jail.

John hears what Jesus is doing and wants to clarify Jesus’ calling. He sends his disciples to ask Jesus, “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” One doesn’t know what precipitated this enquiry. It’s quite astounding given John’s head-over-heels appreciation of and response to Jesus at the beginning of his ministry.

However, the story gives us idea of how Jesus sees his calling. He says: “Go and tell John what you hear and see: The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them.”

If we focus on the Advent theme of “birth,” this text is given by the lectionary to show that while Christmas is about the birth of a baby in Bethlehem it is also about the birth of a ministry.

The ministry is described in summary here by Jesus – the babe in Bethlehem now a man engaged in practical, life-giving work and therefore holy work. We are not told if John is convinced by Jesus’ explanation of his high calling.

The ministry is holistic. The disabled are healed, the dead are raised and good news comes to the poor. It’s the full package.

It’s difficult to figure out how Jesus was able to do these things and how we apply this message today. Some people live with disabilities all their life. Some as a result of their disabilities and others with no apparent disability feel that life has passed them by and life has become a kind of living death. Some living in poverty find it difficult to get out of poverty or out of the cycle of poverty.

It’s simple to say that Jesus healed the disabled, raised the dead and brought good news to the poor. He no doubt did these things and we praise him for that. It’s another thing to see how these things happen in

our day. I looked online and found a site that listed inspirational stories of people with disabilities.

Robin J. Titterington's story embraces each element of Jesus' ministry as stated in today's biblical text. Robin is a Roman Catholic sister with a disabling condition. I'm assuming that her order has some kind of vow of poverty although she is not poor in the sense we understand poor. Nevertheless, her story is telling.

She writes: "I was born with spina bifida. When I was 19, I became deafened from an antibiotic given to save my life from severe kidney infections. When I was 33, my kidneys failed and I began dialysis. I had a transplant and have been on dialysis for nine years. I am not eligible for another transplant due to my worsening scoliosis. Yet I hesitate to submit my story.

"Why? Because my disabilities do not define my life. Our culture is such that if you do not look like people in magazines and in movies, it is assumed you have a sad life. I am a Christian, a woman, a sister, an aunt, mom to my pets 'the fabulous furrries,' a devout Braves fan, and a tree-hugger. I can think of many more adjectives before I would arrive at 'person with a disability.'

"My life is not so different from other single women: I graduated from college (with honors), I hold a Master's degree from New York University, I am a certified public manager, and I have 20 years of full-time work experience in rehabilitation administration. I own my house (which I share with the fabulous furrries), I drive my car. I have traveled to most of the 50 states, Mexico, Canada and Austria. In fact, during both trips to Austria I received dialysis treatments.

"Why do I feel I have a happy, satisfied and peaceful life? No doubt most of it is due to my faith. I know I am never alone. That is not to say I never have a bad day, but knowing I am not alone and that I am loved by my Lord gets me through the rough times. I am a sister in the Daughter of the King lay order and my sisters are wonderful spiritual role models. I feel challenged by learning from them to continue to grow in faith.

"Of course, none of this would be possible without my parents. Sadly, they both passed away when I was relatively young, my mom died when I was 14, my dad when I was 24. I am now 51 and grew up in a time when expectations were not high for someone with a severe disability. Yet there was never a question that I might not go to college, just like my older brothers did. I am sure they must have had to fight a lot to get treatments and education for me but their expectations of me were high. (And my family laughs a lot too!)

“Lastly, there are my friends. Some are close by in location, some are not, but all are close by in thought and prayer. I have a group on my email listing of ‘earth angels’ and one email to that group and I know I am lifted in prayer by many.”

This is incarnation in the 21st century. “Tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them.”

Robin’s story can be told many times over by the disabled and despondent, those who were once dead and are now alive, and the poor. This is not to say that the pain of disability and psychological pain is not real and debilitating, or that it is easy to get out of the abyss of a death-like life, or a breeze to get out of poverty. All these are real but if Robin’s story is anything to go by Jesus counts for something. He does indeed heal the sick and disabled, raise the dead and bring good news to the poor.

He does it through empowered Christians today who incarnate his ministry for themselves and others. We do so through faith, empathy, courage, care, hope and love in our work, homes and volunteering...and through our support of medical science and engineering.

Caring science and engineering performs many miracles. There are GPS’s (Global Positioning System’s) and GIS’s (Geographic Information System’s) that help the blind “see” in new ways. Roads, curbs, centerlines, manhole covers, storm drains, road signs, telephone or power poles, fire hydrants, walkways, sidewalk cracks, and much more are being mapped with greater accuracy for the blind.

Think of how useful it would be to a blind traveler to know that not only is a telephone pole just ahead on the right, but there could be a large crack in the sidewalk that may not have been repaired yet.

Another amazing discovery for blind people is the BrainPort vision device, a non-surgical visual prosthetic device that translates information from a digital video camera to your tongue, through gentle electrical stimulation. It works best for individuals who are blind and have no better than light perception. Since the eye or optic nerve is not stimulated, the technology has the potential to work across a wide range of visual impairments.”

This is a complicated process and can be read in more detail online. Along with a GPS and GIS, it is a marvelous way for blind people to receive their sight. It's biblical.

Bread for the World's support of a tax relief bill for "poor" working families, which we helped get through Congress in our letter-writing campaign, was a wonderful way that people of Christ brought good news to the poor this month.

I'm scratching the surface of what is happening and what is possible out there.

God is in the details. God came to be with us in Jesus Christ and God in Christ is still with us today in healing those with disabilities, raising the dead and bringing good news to the poor. Christmas – our celebration of Jesus – was and is indeed birth of a person and birth of a wonderful ministry in you and me and the entire world. Amen.