

Homily 2011-1211 3rd Advent 5pm & 10pm

Bill Edens

“The blackness of hell was all about me. The sorrows of the world accompanied me. I was like one gone down into the pit. Hope had forsaken me. I was that mother whose child had been raped and slain. I was the mother who had borne the monster who had done it. I was even that monster, feeling in my own heart every abomination.”

The woman who said these words, Dorothy Day, was born November 8th, 1897. She was not religious, but as a young adult was very concerned with the plight of workers in the 1920's in New York where Capital dominated Labor and the Tycoons ruled. She became a writer for a communist magazine at a time when the longing for a transformed American society was at a fever pitch.

The rich and the corporations dominated the financial scene, and there were vast numbers of poor throughout America who had no home or job or retirement account or health insurance. We of the 20th century tend to hear the word “communism” in relation to the Cold War and the fear of Soviet expansion. But Dorothy Day was involved in the international workers movement. There was a campaign to bring about dignity for workers, for they were the poor of society. In our day we have to include those who can't get work in our prayers

I can imagine Dorothy Day meditating on our passage today from Isaiah 61: *“The Spirit of God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me, he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim a year of favor from the Lord.”*

She longed for societal transformation, but she came to realize that personal transformation must come first. In her book “From Union Square (New York) to Rome” Dorothy says “I want to bring out in this book a succession of events that

brought me to His feet, glimpses of Him that I received through many years which made me feel the vital need of Him and of religion.” “I will try to trace for you the steps by which I came to accept the faith that I believe was always in my heart. I will emphasize the good I encountered even amid people that tried to reject God.”

Dorothy struggled with Catholicism. It was big: sacraments and morality and the papacy. It was diametrically opposed to her early life and her days as an activist. She followed very much the path of John the Baptist – John’s longing for the kingdom of heaven brought him to renounce all physical things and to give himself completely to the mission. When they ask him who he is and why he is baptizing people, he continues to turn the spotlight off himself. “No I am not the Messiah, no I am not Elijah or one of the prophets....I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘prepare the way of the Lord.’”

Paul says to the Thessalonians “Pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances, do not quench the spirit. Test everything, retain what is good.” She tested every possible approach – 2 failed marriages, an abortion, a child out of wedlock, communism (international campaign for workers’ rights). She tried public demonstrations, civil disobedience, was jailed twice, and went on a hunger strike. Eventually, she renounced personal possessions and lived among the poor.

During her struggle to meet the needs of the poor she would go into a Catholic church on 34th Street when nobody was around and argue with Jesus on the Crucifix. “How can you let people be in poverty? How can you allow the rich to take everything? Why won’t you help me make sense of my life?” During this time she was reading “The Imitation of Christ” but still there was a consuming anguish of spirit. Eventually she made the decision to be baptized. The day of her baptism was a terrible day. Though it was not joyful or peaceful she went through with it. But a year after baptism her heart was more settled and her confirmation was joyful. Then she received her first communion.

Finally, meeting Peter Maurin, a Catholic philosopher from France, she had a dialogue partner that met the needs of her mind. Together they started publishing a magazine called the Catholic Worker, which is still being printed today. Then in 1933, in the depths of the Depression, Dorothy began opening up houses of hospitality. Unlike social service agencies, they asked no questions and made no regulations. If you were hungry they gave you something to eat. If you were thirsty they gave you something to drink. If you had to place to stay they would give you a place to stay.

Today the Catholic Worker has houses of hospitality in 185 cities through the world, including Berkeley. They do it without much administration or overhead. There's no central governance. Nobody gets paid. It's kind of miraculous they can sustain this effort with volunteer labor and very little structure. Despite Dorothy Day's tendency to argue with the Bishop, the Catholic Church has begun the sainthood process for Dorothy Day. She is titled "Servant of God, Dorothy Day."

As we read in Isaiah chapter 61 today, "For as the garden causes what is sown in it to spring up,
So the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations.

John the Baptist said to his questioners: "Among you stands one whom you do not know, the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal."

This one whom we do not know is likely a poor person. John and Dorothy both teach us that to be among the poor is joy, because the poor are special to God. Though there are hardships, God says through Paul in his letter to the Thessalonians "Brothers and Sisters, Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances, for this is the will of Jesus Christ for you."

I have wanted to introduce you to a modern-day woman who prepared the way of the Lord. See if you can open your heart to this amazing woman

Volunteer with the Catholic Worker of Berkeley, or do something through Cal Core, or our own Newman Service Corps.

There will be some other key feminine figures in the coming weeks who also prepare the way of the Lord. These are the women in Jesus' genealogy:

These women happened upon their role in salvation history in rather unorthodox, unplanned and unexpected ways.

Tamar: married two of Judah's sons. They both died leaving her childless. According to the morals of the day, she should be given in marriage to a surviving brother. But, Judah wouldn't agree, and she faced life as a childless widow, a cruel fate. So one day she veiled herself and went to the crossroads. Judah came by and wanted to hire her as a prostitute, though he didn't know who she was. So she went with him, got pregnant, and voila here comes Perez! He is a key male figure in the genealogy!

Rahab: She is a prostitute, a Canaanite who lives in Jericho. She hides the Israelite spies whom Joshua sent to reconnoiter the land of Jericho. In return for her help, she and her family are spared the lot of Jericho.

Ruth is a Moabite, a foreigner, who married an Israelite seeking refuge in the land of Moab during a famine in his native Bethlehem. After losing her husband, Ruth accompanies her mother in law back to Bethlehem. This is unusual dedication. There she meets Boaz, her future husband, while picking up leftover grain in the fields. Her story was so important in the Hebrew tradition that it was written down. It is one of the three books in the Catholic Bible that bears a woman's name.

Finally, beautiful Bathsheba that king David seduces. She becomes pregnant, so he has her husband killed to try to cover up his infidelity. She and David give birth to Solomon, who became king – another key figure in Jesus' genealogy.

Then along comes Mary. She's extremely poor. The angel asks her to become mother of the messiah and she becomes pregnant, unmarried, and marginal.

The perfect genealogy of Jesus is intermingled with women who were outside societal norms:

Shattered by sexually exploited, immoral, alien, pregnant-out-of-wedlock women.
But a very great truth is being taught:

That from the beginning of God's interaction with humanity women have been a very important part of God's plan

Their place is not as celebrated as men

But this is not God's fault

It is a consequence of the domination of women by men, which is implicitly recalled in this passage through the overwhelming majority of men mentioned.