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The God-Bearer

Christmas, 2018

Beloved in Christ,

It is hard to see them the way they were: mother, husband, child, exhausted, sheltered in the nick of time, she giving birth the way many still do— uncertain surroundings, bad odds, little help. Luke reaches back into the shadows and, with his elegant Greek, dares to call this baby in rags both Lord and Christ.

It is hard to see the glory the way it was: years of pageants, adorable angels with fluffy wings and foil halos crowd the foreground. When Luke describes this glory, he uses very few words: innumerable angels, incomparable light, the full-throated praise of heaven, and the messengers charged to carry the news are the poorest of the poor, men of few words, finding the family, and telling what they saw.

Luke lifts them out of the shadows, shows Christ's mother in three dimensions. There we see a woman of courage, devotion, steadfast love. From the moment she agrees to bear the Savior, for the rest of her life, all that she hears, learns, knows of Him, she will treasure, ponder in her heart. And in this moment, even in all the poverty, for a little while there is peace and rest.

One day over thirty years ago, when I was a young priest in New York City, a few days before Christmas, I was rushing about on the street when I saw in front of me a woman sitting on a subway grate, a baby in her arms. They were both wrapped up against the cold. I stopped and stooped down beside her. I asked her if she was all right, if she needed anything. She had almost no English, but smiled in recognition when she saw my collar. At my questions, she shook her head, smiled, gently waved her hand, repeating, "It's okay, okay." Then, as though she remembered something, she caught my coat in her right hand, and spoke a stream of words. Of course I couldn't understand. She said them again, slowly. I shook my head, said I was sorry. She looked at me, smiled, said one word again, and as she spoke, with her right hand she traced in the air the sign of the Cross.

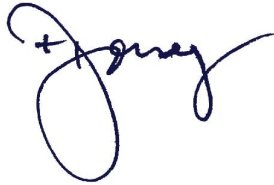
Then I understood. I put my left hand on her head, prayed for her protection, with my thumb making the sign of the Cross on her forehead and on the forehead of her child. Her eyes were closed, but when she heard the name of the Trinity, she beamed. She thanked me repeatedly, and waved me on. Only later did I see that I was the one who was blessed.

So, once again this year, rejoice in the pageants, wherever you find them, or at least remember them fondly: the little ones dressed like sheep, the fluffy toddling angels, the



distracted shepherds in their itchy headgear, the teens and pre-teens who generously agreed to stand in for the Holy Child's parents for one more year, and the Baby of course, even if He is played by someone's doll. Beyond all the good-hearted stagecraft, try to see them all as they were, as they are: the Lord Jesus, Joseph and Mary, the poor first witnesses, the heavens full of praise. And after the costumes are put away, after you leave church, keep your eyes peeled for Him, still present in the neighbor you least expect to meet, and for Her, the God-bearer, the Most Holy, reflected in every woman who insists we care for all the children of Eve. Seek them out. Serve them. And be blessed.

Faithfully your bishop,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Dorsey W.M. McConnell". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large loop at the end.

(The Right Reverend) Dorsey W.M. McConnell, D.D.
VIII Bishop of Pittsburgh

