

PORTABLE POINTSETTAS

Here at Saugatuck every Advent and Christmas season entails an enormous amount of behind the scenes work. This past week, for instance, our secretary Marcia had to prepare four different bulletins for today. Caesar, Craig, AnDrea and dozens of folks have practiced music for each of our services. Our building manager Dave had to get various rooms arranged just so. And Abby, Kathy Ross, and others, have been rounding up scenery and costumes for tonight's pageant.

And then there are our poinsettias. Lovingly provided by our Women's Fellowship, our poinsettias turn our sanctuary into a magical place on Christmas Eve. Their bright pink and red blossoms brighten things up during the darkest days of the year. They truly grace our chancel. But they don't appear out of nowhere.

They are arranged by Peggy Brady and others, and this year, it is especially complicated. They had to be set up for this morning, then most of them will be removed to make way for the pageant. Then, tonight, after, the pageant, they will be put back into position for the ten o'clock candlelight service.

As Peggy and I talked through the schedule earlier this week, she spoke of whisking the flowers out after the morning services, and then whisking them back after the pageant. "They'll be real portable poinsettias," she said.

I laughed, and then I said, "What a great sermon title—*Portable Poinsettias*." Later, as I thought about it I decided to use it this morning, for our lesson from Isaiah is all about what happens as a result of work that goes on behind the scenes. For just as our chancel blossoms with poinsettias due to invisible hands at work, so too the prophet Isaiah speaks of the desert blossoming because of the invisible work of God.

Originally written during the time when the Jews were being held in exile hundreds of miles from home, this part of Isaiah tells of a day when the Messiah will come and lead the exiled Israelites home. Take heart, says Isaiah, even though you can't see it now, God has not forgotten your plight. God is quietly working behind the scenes, bringing about the Day of the Lord, the day of salvation, the day of rejoicing. And in that day, proclaims Isaiah, "The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom; like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice with joy and singing." (Isaiah 35:1-2a)

Six hundred years after the time of Isaiah the Jews no longer lived in exile, but they did live under the oppressive hand of the Roman rulers. And they still longed for a Messiah. They still longed for one who would come from God to save them from oppression. The early church believed that Jesus of Nazareth to be that very one.

They believed he was the Messiah promised by Isaiah. And while his coming didn't bring about a revolution, while the Romans continued to dominate, Jesus did save them from the oppression of sin. He saved them from despair and desolation. He brought them hope, and a sense of inner peace. He worked in their hearts, behind the scenes of their daily lives. And we who celebrate Christmas do so because we believe he can and does do the very same thing today. In our lives. For out of the deserts of despair and grief, out of the wastelands of purposelessness and sin, he has brought forth blossoms of beauty and goodness and love.

Pastor Stuart Briscoe tells of a time he and his wife Jill made a visit to a missionary outpost in the Sahara Desert. The outpost itself was in a very dry and desolate spot. Briscoe writes: "In the midst of this black expanse of nothingness, in the backyard of the missionary dwelling, we noticed a splash of green and a flash of orange. On closer inspection we found a tiny bush clinging tenaciously to life, proudly bearing a solitary rose. Beside the bush was a hole, a few feet deep, hacked out of the cinders and half filled with decaying [compost] from the kitchen." That single rose blossomed in the desert because someone took the time and effort to work behind the scenes, to nurture it to full flower. Writes Briscoe: "there it bloomed—fragile and fragrant—a testimony to loving care, endless patience and sheer hard work."

Jill Briscoe suffers from chronic back problems, and when they arrived at the mission outpost, she was in real pain. Traveling by plane and bouncing jeep had, no doubt, caused her problems to flare up anew. So her missionary hosts sent her off to rest, and proposed breakfast in bed the next morning.

As the sun rose, breakfast came as promised. And sitting on her tray, was a note, which read, "Thank you for coming all this way." And beside the note, a small vase, with one lone orange rose.

It was, of course, not just a symbol of gratitude; it was a sign of sacrifice, and a token of hope. It reminded the Briscoes that God was still at work, even in that desolate desert. In the rose, and in the graciousness of their hosts, they were reminded God often works behind the scenes.

Barbara Chamberlain grew up in California's central valley. She and her sister Jan often had to make do with very little, during World War II days, things were often very tight.

One of their favorite games was playing Christmas. Each year, after the tree started to shed more needles than it kept, their father would cart out the tree to the compost pile. But Barbara and Jan would rescue it, and then redecorate. They'd use old broken ornaments, and the browning strings of popcorn and cranberries. They'd make ornaments out of the foil wrappers that come with sticks of gum. They'd even fill old stockings with stones. And, using a bit of cardboard, they'd cut out a star, and paint it with watercolors to top off their tree.

One year, after they'd gotten their redecorated tree all set, a new boy in the neighborhood named Billy came riding by their house on a shiny new bike.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"Playing Christmas," answered Babara.

"How dumb! Christmas is over—and that old dead tree looks like a mass of junk!"

Barbara writes: "I suddenly saw the tree as it looked to him. Doubt stabbed my delight. I blinked; staring first at the drooping branches, then at Billy"

'What did you get for Christmas?' he asked. 'Grandma bought me a bike.'

I never knew how to answer him, but Jan always spoke her mind.

'We got a lot more than you, Billy . . . a lot more.'

'Like what?'

Before I could warn her she held up the tumbling, turning, wooden monkey strung between two sticks.

'That cost 10 cents at Woolworth!' Billy jeered.

'We got candy, too,' Jan protested, starting to pick up her lumpy stocking. . . .

Billy grabbed it. 'Give me some.'

The stones, filling the stocking, spilled out onto the ground.

Jan hesitated, ' . . . We . . . already ate the candy.'

'You never got any. You dumb Okies! You and your stupid tree.'" (Christian Science Monitor, 1-3-83)

And with that, he hopped on his bike and was off. After that nobody would play Christmas with them, though they had in the past. And every time Billy saw Barbara or Jan he would make fun of their tired old tree or their stone filled stockings.

And often, when they'd get up in the morning, they'd find the tree had been knocked down. Ornaments scattered across the yard.

But Barbara would persist. She and Jan would gather up the ornaments, put the tree a bit deeper in the compost pile, and hang the battered ornaments one more time. Finally Billy grew tired of his mischief and the tree stood unmolested.

Over the winter, most of the needles fell off. But when it came time to do spring planting and Barbara's father went for some compost off the pile, Barbara grew worried he'd move the tree. But he was a wise man, and seeing their anguish, he reassured them, the tree would stay put.

Suddenly, though, he stopped in his digging. "Look, girls, look here!"

And there, with the tip of his shovel, he pointed out that growing in the compost was a very small pine branch. They soon realized the shoot, went all the way back to the trunk of their tired old tree. And even though it seemed dead, even though it was tattered and torn and stuck in a compost pile, it was bringing forth a new shoot, a new blossom. For God was at work behind the scenes.

That shoot grew, and when the family moved from that house, the resulting tree was taller than Barbara.

As Barbara writes, "The very year when we needed hope the most that tree had come into being." (Ibid.)

Sisters and brothers, as we celebrate this Christmas, as we remember the One born not in a palace, but in a barn strewn with compost, might we remember his birth is a sign of hope. Let us remember that like portable poinsettias, and orange blossoms in the desert, like battered old trees that issue new life, the coming of Christ is a potent reminder that God is indeed at work in our church, in our homes, and around the world.

And the wilderness and the dry land shall be glad. The desert shall rejoice and blossom. It shall, indeed, rejoice with joy and singing.

**Amen
John H. Danner**