

Angels in the new year

Phyllis Zagano | Dec. 21, 2011 Just Catholic

We tend to forget the end of Luke's account of the annunciation. We remember the angel, we remember Mary's fiat, but that last line gets buried in gauzy imaginings of gold and light.

"And then the angel left her."

The sentence is stunning. In the Scripture story, a young girl has graciously, generously, hopefully accepted news of enormous consequence. Then the angel takes off.

How absolutely ... what? Unfair? Unbelievable? What kind of God sends an angel with that kind of message and then has the angel take off, leaving her alone?

Yet the story is not unfamiliar. Mary is indeed the icon of many in our world today. Whether they face unemployment and debt, or mourn the loss of property or loved ones, or suffer ordinary holiday blues, a lot of people on this planet are, or at least feel they are, very much alone.

Where are the angels?

Well, would you believe, they are showing up. Starting in mid-December, "Secret Santas" paid layaway bills at Kmart, ransoming toys and clothing for the folks who could not pay in full up front. The news stories -- from Nebraska, Ohio, Illinois, North Carolina, Alabama, it seems from half the nation -- are all the same. Someone calls or walks into a Kmart and asks the manager if there is an unpaid layaway within his or her budget. Some Secret Santas give \$150; some give \$400; one spent \$15,000 to pay off a number of accounts. And the list is growing.

Some pass out cash. The Associated Press reports that in 25 years of being a Secret Santa, Larry Stewart of Kansas City, Mo., gave away \$1.3 million of his own money. He recruited a replacement before he died in 2007, but over the past quarter-century, the tradition spread to about two dozen U.S. cities. Every single story is a tear-jerker: A Secret Santa gives a \$100 bill to a lone woman and suggests she buy a few steaks. The woman says she'll pay some tax bills. So Santa gives her \$200 more.

You have to love it.

Of course the cynics will say it's wasted Band-Aids, misdirected drops in the bucket. They'll argue the beneficiaries may not be really that much in need. They'll say the real poor need the money more.

Humbug. Everybody needs a hug.

There is real anxiety decking the halls. It grows wild in hospitals and nursing homes. It creeps along department store displays. It roots in train and subway seats. It entangles psyches and souls in ways they cannot shake or even fully describe.

And it's catching. I daresay every single one of us gets a touch of Christmas-New Year blues, but this year, the virus is getting out of hand. Some of the illness is caused by old-fashioned greed mixed with envy, morphed into a rampant and ridiculous consumerism wanting iPhones instead of chickens in everybody's pots. Some grows from misdirected passions we are too sophisticated to call lust. Some springs from those fat and lazy twins, gluttony and sloth. Some is caused by personal or public error that lets anger and pride grab hold to direct the spotlight inward.

It is time to walk away from all that, both as individuals and as a nation. We've made mistakes, personally and corporately. We've hurt and been hurt. But this is the season for forgiveness. And forgiveness is the first gift we must give and must receive.

No one needs to look back. What happened, happened. What is done is done. We need to fill the holes left by wanton waste, but we need not dwell on our mistakes or relight the fires of old wounds.

Will we -- personally and as a hurting world -- still ache as new days dawn? Of course we will. But we can work at getting out of it as we unwrap the gratuitous gift of a new year.

Maybe we should take a break from being practical for once and become whatever type of Secret Santas we are able to. Here and around the world, simple folks with simple dreams are terrified. They need all sorts of help.

So let's stare a little longer at the Christmas tree until, blinded by the light, we can all turn into angels.

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