[**Malachi 3:1-4**](https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=327#hebrew_reading)

[**Psalm 84**](https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=327#psalm_reading)

[**Hebrews 2:14-18**](https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=327#epistle_reading)

[**Luke 2:22-40**](https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=327#gospel_reading)

THE LIVING WORD Sermon for February 3, 2019

By Rev. Dr. Don Algeo

Late last year, I joined the swelling ranks of Americans who sent off fifty or sixty bucks to a company which, in turn, sent me a little plastic vial, with instructions to spit into it and then return it in the enclosed prepaid package. You all know what I’m talking about.

Without bragging, I have to admit that I was pleased to learn that my great great grandfather on my mother’s side was Abraham Lincoln, and my great great grandmother on my father’s side was Florence Nightingale. And I also promise that’s the only deliberate lie I’ll tell during this sermon.

Back to reality, now, but it truly was interesting to learn a little about my genetic history, and when I told my sister about it, she was intrigued enough to send off a payment for her and her husband as well. And since we both now had a mild case of the genealogy bug, we spent and continue to spend part of the time during our weekly phone conversation talking and reminiscing about our shared ancestry.

As part of that conversation, my sister recalled that she had a package of family history stored somewhere in the attic that she hadn’t looked at in many years and couldn’t even remember when it had come into her possession or even who sent it to her. (That kind of faulty memory, by the way, is characteristic of my family.)

A couple of weeks ago she told me that she had rummaged around in the attic and found the packet, and that after reading it herself, she put it in the mail to me.

Well, that packet arrived last week, and after reading page after page after page listing the names of people I never met, reading when they were born, where they were buried, who their children were, when the children were born, whom they married, when they passed away, where they were buried, and on and on, page after page, I have to admit that my interest in genealogy began to wane.

But there was one thing in the package that that stood out from the rest. It was an old type-written manuscript of a one-act play, nine pages long, and it had been written by my grandmother on my mother’s side, presumably for some dramatic performance at her church, probably at Christmas, and probably intended for children to perform for their parents.

The play was about Jesus, and it basically gave a very brief version of all the stages of the life of Jesus, from His birth right up to His death on the cross, complete with stage directions like this one: *THREE SHEPHERDS WALK SLOWLY TO BARN-AS THEY WALK, MORE LIGHTS TURNED ON-BELLS RING-BABY CRIES. ANGELS HUM SILENT NIGHT. AS SHEPHERDS ARRIVE SHEPHERDS PRESENT GIFTS TO BABE AND LEAVE. A PAUSE: MARY, JOSEPH AND BABE LEAVE BARN, GO TO TEMPLE, MARY CARRIES BABE. AS THEY NEAR THE TEMPLE.*

And at that point the action resumes. And it’s actually the dialogue from that point that I’d like to share with you. Here it is:

Mary: I am so glad we were able to bring Jesus to the temple. I have wanted to bring Him here ever since His birth.

Joseph: I too have waited for this day. It will be a pleasure to present Jesus at the temple. There will be many who will want to see our baby Jesus.

And then another stage direction: *THEY ENTER TEMPLE. SIMON AN OLD MAN MEETS THEM. TAKES JESUS.*

Simon: I am so glad I have been allowed to live long enough for this hour to come. God had told me I would see His Son, Jesus, before I departed this earth. My cup runneth over. (HE RAISES HIS EYES TO HEAVEN). Thank you, my God, my wish has been fulfilled. Now I can depart in peace.

 *GIVES JESUS BACK TO MARY, TURNS AND LEAVES. AN OLD LADY COMES FORWARD, LOOKS AT THE BABE IN MARY’S ARMS AND EXCLAIMS*

Old Lady: At last! At long last! I have seen the baby Jesus. It had been revealed to me I should see Jesus here in the temple and now it has happened. I thank God. He has filled my cup to overflowing. Now my days are ended and I can enter God’s house with joy.

And I particularly like the stage direction that then concludes this episode: *FALLS BACKWARD OUT OF SIGHT. TWO BOYS CATCH HER UNSEEN.*

The author of this play, by the way, was Grace Irene Diehl, born May 26, 1893, daughter of John Henry Diehl and Mary Elizabeth McKinney Diehl, who married Rossa D. MacKenzie on Feb 13, 1910, in Hazelton, Iowa. I have more information, for anyone interested.

My grandmother lived out her most of her adult life on a farm outside a very small town called Dazey that, in its heyday, might have had three or four hundred residents. It had a general store, a post office, a small hotel, a bar/restaurant, a couple of granaries nearby, a cemetery, and a Methodist church.

She played a very active role in her church. Along with her family and the very hard work of just staying alive in those days, the church was the third foundation of her life. I’m sure everyone here can remember women of their own acquaintance, about whom much the same would be true. She taught herself to play the piano so she could provide the accompaniment at the service, she served in all the various church offices except pastor. In fact, I believe she and her husband had been part of the community of farmers that built the church in the first place.

But up until the time my sister sent me that packet, I hadn’t realized that my grandmother was also the creative force behind what would have been one of the church’s theatrical presentations.

Now I can only speak for myself, but if I had to choose between Luke’s version and that of my grandmother, I think I might go with hers, largely because of the stage directions. The instructions remind me that this is someone, my grandmother, reimagining the story, bringing it into her own heart, reflecting on it, then looking around at her current circumstances and intentions, and translating that story into something that would answer to her situation and spoken in the language of those who were likely to be its audience.

The house she would have been living in at the time was the one I remember from my own childhood visits there, and it was far from a fancy affair. My grandparents had built it themselves, way out in the country, and it had a kitchen, a living room and a bedroom, and up a very narrow set of stairs, there was an attic space that had been divided into two tiny bedrooms. Heat came from a coal-burning stove, and there was no running water or indoor plumbing.

That meant my grandmother must have done her writing at the kitchen table, by the light of a kerosene lamp. I can picture her sitting there in her heavy winter clothes, maybe leaning back in the plain country chair and staring through the small window at the white unbroken landscape stretching as far as you can see. I can imagine her thinking about how to stage manage the bells ringing, the baby crying, the angels humming, all using only the resources of that little country church.

She calls Simeon Simon, and instead of naming the prophetess, Anna, she just says *Old Lady*, and I wonder why. We’ll never know, but we’ll know this, she had a reason for it, and the reason had something to do with the circumstances in which the play would be performed.

And I try to share her inner visualization as she wrote that the old lady falls back out of sight, where two boys wait to catch her falling body. How would that have been done in a little church? Again, we’ll never know, but what we will know is that, somehow, some way, it was done.

Obviously they didn’t own a typewriter, so she probably wrote it out by hand, then took it into the church to get it into typewritten form. I can imagine her hunched over the typewriter and slowly tying it out with her big no-nonsense hands. The copy I now have in my very citified hands is full of typos.

And as I read through her play, written with all the skill at her command probably for a one-time performance in front of a little farm-country audience in a small country church, I thought: Isn’t this a nice image for the true and sincere way of engaging with the Holy Word?

We speak of the Bible as the living word of God, and what that must surely mean, if it has meaning at all, is not that it is a set of instructions or a guidebook or a theological treatise or a repository of doctrine, but rather that it’s something like an open field for our faith filled imagination. Its life is not ‘out there’ somewhere, but within each reader, and that life is fed by the reader feeding on its stories and its narration, literally incorporating them into his or her own reality, the true, everyday reality of the life each of us leads.

In a pivotal passage in John’s gospel, Jesus tells His disciples:

 *Truly, truly, I say to****you****,****unless******you******eat****the****flesh****of the Son of man and****drink****his****blood****,****you****have no life in****you****; he who****eats******my******flesh******and******drinks******my******blood****has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day.* (53)

The Greek word translated ‘eats’ here is actually the Greek word for ‘chews”: he who *chews* my flesh … has eternal life.

The message of the gospel is never a communication between God and a crowd; it is always a communication between God and an individual, giving guidance and support, not in the abstract, but in the actual, particular situation of each individual life.

And I think that’s why a pretty good image of what it means for the Bible to be God’s living word is provided by the picture of my grandmother, sitting at her kitchen table, trying to do her own rough justice to Luke’s story of Jesus, while the cold prairie winds blew around her little house on a dark North Dakota night, long ago.

And so this morning, Father, we pray that you let Your written word speak to us in familiar and comforting tones, aware of who we are and what we need, offering support where support is needed, encouragement when we are drifting into fear or disappointment, friendship and love when we feel most alone. We pray that You let it speak to each of us as Jesus might have done, were He still here, because He is still here, and we offer this prayer in His name.