

*Third Sunday of Advent*

December 17, 2017

Sermon by Pastor Cindy Bullock

The Holy Gospel according to Saint Luke. (Luke 1: 26-38)

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God." Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her.

The Gospel of our Lord.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

When I was just out of seminary, my first call was to an urban congregation in Richmond, Virginia. It was an old, stately, cathedral-like building with two high towers, and bright red doors, and a gothic sanctuary. It graced a traffic circle with one of those confederate statues that you heard so much about last fall.

The neighborhood was changing. The century-old, three-story brownstones were occupied alternately by students from VCU, by drug addicts who rented by the week, and by young couples who were trying to revitalize the neighborhood.

But the one thing the neighborhood didn't have was children. And so it made it really tough for the church to have Bible School during the summer. The church hadn't even tried in years. But here I was, the new, young pastor, determined to give it a go.

Luckily, one of our members, Annabel, who was a seminary professor of Christian Education, said, "Well, if we don't have enough kids, we'll just import some." So we called all of the women's shelters in town and invited those kids to come to our Bible School. And they all came. Kids and moms with babies in arms all showed up for Bible School. The church was so excited about it that I think the volunteers outnumbered the kids two to one. So we had this grand time: stories, and arts and crafts, and games. The whole nine yards.

On Wednesday of that week, we decided to have Christmas in July. We made ornaments, we baked Christmas cookies; and, of course, we had a Christmas pageant. We pulled out the old costumes and dusted them off. We assigned the shepherds and the wise men.

But when we got to Mary we got into trouble. There were two young ladies from the shelter who both wanted to be Mary, and neither one of them was going to give in. These were girls that knew how to stand up for themselves; and, by golly, they were each going to be Mary, and no one was going to stand in their way. I was envisioning blood in the stable. But Annabel looked up and said, "What a great idea! Of course, we need two Marys! There is nothing in the Bible that says that we can't have two Marys." She whipped out a second baby from the nursery; she grabbed another headscarf, and sat both young girls by the manger. And they beamed with holy light.

I wonder if those girls would have been so determined to be Mary if they knew what they were getting into. Would they have wanted the job if they had any idea of what the angel Gabriel was asking them to do?

Today, I want you to try to imagine a different Christmas pageant, where Mary is played by a fourteen or fifteen year old girl. And Gabriel, well, he'll be played by a man of wisdom and experience. Let's say about seventy, I think. Someone who has seen what the world can do. In this pageant, I think they might play the scene a little differently.

Our Gabriel might pause for a moment outside of Mary's house, wondering what he will say, terrified about what he is about to do to this child. How could she begin to understand the choice she was being given, to hold the eternal, infinite, uncontainable holy in her own small body? How can he help her understand? How can she know the terrible and beautiful future, the terrible and beautiful choice that was hers alone?

Our Gabriel, wise of years, one who had stood in places of power and seen the world turn, he would take pause at what he was asked to do. He would know what a fearsome task he had on that day, the fate of this child, the fate of this world, in his request to her. Entering her house, slowly, I think, he would say, "*Greetings, favored one. The Lord is with you.*"

And there stands Mary, young enough to dream, but old enough to know that life can be hard and people can be cruel. How would our Mary welcome this strange visitor? Luke said she was “*dia-tah-rahk-they*” – she was agitated, she was stirred up, she was disturbed. And she wondered about this guy, as only a fourteen or fifteen year old could. Every parent throughout time has seen the face. “Who are you?”

This Mary is not going to make it easy on Gabriel. “How can this be?” she asks. “What are you talking about?” There is strength in her, and determination, like those girls from the shelter. Gabriel does his best. But it’s just words. Well, it’s kind of, well, it’s like a shadow, and a baby, and a son that is God. The words tumble out.

Until our Mary – just young enough and just old enough – catches the dream of what could be. Her face changes. Her imagination is on fire. She sees what God intends, something so new, so creative, so brave, that she can only whisper, “*Let it be,*” and “*Here I am.*” She won’t know the details. She can’t know the implications. All she has is the dream, the promise that God is faithful.

This Mary demonstrates for us what it looks like to live into the future, to trust the promises of God. She has only seen God’s intentions for the world. She knows what the end should be: a world at peace, with justice, where all are fed and cared for, where the whole creation can become what God intended it to be. She sees where God is leading us, and she is determined to live toward that. She pushes, she sacrifices, she endures, all with the dream in mind. She lives as if the coming future is already here. And that’s why she sings.

She sings:

*“My soul magnifies the Lord,  
and my spirit rejoices in God  
my Savior.”*

Even though she’s young, and she’s pregnant, and she’s dishonored, she sings.

She sings:

*“He has shown strength with  
his arm;  
he has scattered the proud in the  
thoughts of their hearts.”*

She sings:

*“He has bought down the powerful  
from their thrones,  
and lifted up the lowly.”*

She sings:

*“He has filled the hungry with  
good things,  
and sent the rich away empty.”*

She sings, even though she is poor, and obscure, and hungry, because, for her, God’s future is already here. God’s promised future has begun with this child.

Mary sings. And so do we. Even though we don’t know what today will bring. Even if this has been the most difficult, angry, fearful year we’ve seen in a long time, today we sing. The choir will sing the words,

*“Alleluia!  
O praised be God.  
All raise your voices, sing with thankful voices.  
Thou, God today, hast given us joy.  
Hold fast to Him and praise His name eternal!”*

In fact, this choir cantata is chocked full of praise and thanks and honor and glory.

How dare they? How dare we sing praise and thank God in the midst of the shadows that surround this world? How dare any of us sing, *“Alleluia!”* and *“Glory to God in the highest!”*? Shouldn’t we be subdued and angry and mournful in the midst of a broken world? Are we being naïve? Is it wishful thinking? Are we not paying attention?

We have learned from Mary, the fourteen year old, who is willing to trust God’s promises. And so we are paying attention. We are paying attention to the ways God breaks through into this world. We are seeing people standing up and speaking out. We are seeing authentic conversations between people who disagree. We are seeing kindness and sacrifice and giving. We are seeing people living into the future that God intends, even in the midst of brokenness

And we are remembering that God came into this world in a way no one ever expected. In a way no one even noticed. In the form of a baby, born to a teenager, in a stable, in the night. And that baby and the man he became brought us resurrection. So we know that God is creative and imaginative and still working. God will fulfill God’s promised future. God will be faithful, whatever it takes.

And so with two Marys from a women’s shelter, and with our imagined Mary this morning, and with the Mary of long ago that they honor, we will boldly say, *“Let it be.”* *“Here I am.”* *“And my spirit rejoices!”*

Amen.