

Sunday Sermon
July 16, 2017
“Born of the Virgin Mary”
Luke 1:26-38; Luke 2:1-14

Introduction:

It is called the annunciation, that first lesson that Gracie just read from Chapter 1 of Luke’s gospel. It sounds pretty when you call it that. It sounds scary when you realize what it actually was: the announcement by the angel Gabriel, a messenger of God, to a poor, young unwed teenage girl that she would give birth to the Son of God.

I have tried to imagine that announcement scene. Was there a knock on the door? Or did the angel Gabriel just appear next to Mary, scaring her half to death with his “Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you”?

I love the understatement of Luke's account, “Mary was much perplexed at the angel’s words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be.” Much perplexed, pondered, we guess.

Years ago, when our daughter called and announced that she was going to have a baby, she was married, she was not a teenager, but still my husband and I did not know how to respond. Was this good news? Did they want to have a baby? Was this planned? She was still in school and had a dissertation to write. They were trying to live on her husband’s beginner salary, but there were debts.

“Well, aren’t you excited?” our daughter asked. “We’re waiting,” my husband said, “for you to tell us if we are.”

I.

Mary was so young. Luke tells us she was engaged to the carpenter Joseph. In those days, engagement happened for a Jewish girl between the ages of 12 and 14. The engagement would have been arranged by her parents; Mary would not have been asked.

Gabriel did not ask Mary if she would like to be the mother of God. He told her that she had found favor with God and she would bear a son and that son would be the king of the people forever.

Gabriel did not ask, “How does that sound to you? Does this sound like something you would consider doing for the Lord?”

He simply said, “The Lord is with you.”

And Mary asked, “How can this be?” And that is all she asked.

Barbara Brown Taylor, Episcopal priest, says she can think of several other questions she would have asked Gabriel:

Will Joseph stick around?

Will my parents still love me?

Will my friends stand by me, or will I be dragged into town and stoned as an unwed mother?

What will be birth be like? Will the labor be difficult?

Will there be someone there to help me when the time comes?

You say the child will be king, but what about me?

Will I survive this? What about me?

But if such questions occurred to Mary, she did not ask them. She listened as the angel told her: “Nothing will be impossible with God.”

And then she responded, “Here I am, the servant of the Lord. Let it be with me according to your word.”

Mary has been called the first disciple because she was the first person to get the news of God's salvation of the world through the birth of Jesus. And she responded by saying, “I do not understand what God is doing through me, but here I am.”

II.

The second lesson that Gracie read from Chapter 2 of Luke, is called the birth narrative. We recognize parts of it. We know the scene, and we know it was not perfect like pictures on the front of Christmas cards. The town of Bethlehem was clogged with travelers, none there by choice. The emperor wanted everyone counted and taxed; he could have cared less if they were expecting a child or had a place to sleep.

Joseph and Mary ended up in the space for the animals. There the baby was born. They had to place him in the feeding trough to keep him from getting stepped on by the animals. It was not exactly a silent night, holy night, with everything calm and bright. But then in the places where Jesus enters it never is, is it? After all, that is what Christmas is about.

My sister-in-law, Dawn, who is married to my husband's brother, Lawton, tells about one Christmas when they were living in a church-owned house that sat right beside the church where Lawton was one of the pastors. That particular year Christmas came on a Sunday, and that particular year it snowed for Christmas.

Dawn said they had a rule in their house that on Christmas morning you had to wait until everyone was up and ready before going into the living room to see what Santa brought. That year their youngest daughter, Sarah, woke up very early. Knowing the rule, Sarah did her best to rouse everyone out of bed, but no one would get up.

So Sarah decided to go outside to see the snow and the family dog Daisy. But Sarah quickly came running back into the house and down the hall to her parents' room shouting, “Mama, Daddy, Jesus is in the driveway!”

Wondering if she heard right, Dawn sat up in bed and asked Sarah to repeat herself. “Jesus is in the driveway!” Sarah said, this time with determination. “What

does that mean, Sarah, Jesus in the driveway?” Dawn asked. “Daisy brought Jesus from the manger in the front of the church to our house. He is next to her dog bowl!”

At this time, Lawton jumped out of bed, trying to pull on his pants and tie his shoes at the same time! “Everyone up!” he yelled. “We’ve got to get Jesus back where he belongs before people start coming to church!”

So the family, in a variety of thrown-on clothing, tromped around the church grounds in the snow gathering up what Daisy had scattered. They found Mary and Joseph face down in the snow with icicles on their noses; the sheep and lambs strewn throughout the church cemetery; the camels and wise men were in the parking lot, the camels on their sides, the wise men not looking too wise.

They gathered up, cleaned up and set up the band of characters in their rightful places and placed baby Jesus carefully in the manger. Then they returned to their home to put Daisy in the garage and give thanks that all this had been discovered and repaired before people started arriving.

Dawn says she has thought about that episode many times since. Jesus was in their driveway. They scurried to put him back in the manger, but really, Jesus came to be in our driveways, in the comings and goings of our scattered, turned over lives. After all, that is what Christmas is about.

Conclusion:

The world into which Mary delivered her baby was a crazy, mixed-up, messed-up world where a paranoid King Herod killed innocent children because he thought they were a threat to his throne. And Jesus the Christ, God’s Son, our Lord, conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary, would suffer under Pontius Pilate, would be crucified, die, and be buried. He would descend to the dead. But we know that was not the end of the story. On the third day he rose again.

Martin Luther, the great reformer, once observed that when Jesus was born in Bethlehem, three miracles occurred: God became human, a virgin conceived, and Mary believed. And the greatest of these Christmas miracles, Luther said, was this: Mary believed.

Believed what? The angel’s message: “The Lord is with you. Do not be afraid. For nothing will be impossible with God.” In the seventh month of the year 2017, a message is sent by God to a town in western North Carolina called Morganton, to people there: “The Lord is with you. Do not be afraid. For nothing will be impossible with God.” May we, too, believe.

Credit: Parts of the first half of this sermon adapted from Barbara Brown Taylor, Gospel Medicine, Cowley Publications, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1995, pp. 151-152.