

Christmas Eve 2021

Rev Lucy Bunch

Gospel of Luke

Chapter 1 verses 26-38

The Annunciation

In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you." Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. 31 You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end."

"How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?"

The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. For no word from God will ever fail."

"I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May your word to me be fulfilled." Then the angel left her.

Gospel of Luke

Chapter 2 verses 1-20

The Birth of Jesus

In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. And everyone went to their own town to register.

So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.

And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in

cloths and lying in a manger.” Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,

“Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.”

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let’s go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.”

So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger.

When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.

Homily

In the Christian scriptures there are two birth narratives— Matthew and Luke. Each had their own purpose and audience. Matthew wanted to convince a Jewish audience that Jesus was the true Messiah. Luke, writing for gentiles, wanted to make the case that Jesus was the divine Savior to help free people from oppression.

Neither of these stories are historically true – that was never the point.

People hearing these stories at the time knew this. For example, Luke says that Mary and Joseph had to go to Bethlehem for the census. There was a census around this time, but people did not have to go back to the place where their ancestors were born. That was part of the story that Luke told, to enhance Jesus's status by giving him the same birthplace of King David from the Hebrew scriptures.

None of this would have troubled Luke's listeners. They had no concept of a historical record, or even the idea of something being verifiably true. These concepts would come to humans much later.

People in that time were less interested in what actually happened, and more interested in what it meant. They did not make a sharp distinction between myth and reality – they saw the two tied together in matters of the spirit. So the facts could be false, but the message is true. They saw these as stories which resonated with their experience, their hopes and longings, their spiritual needs.

And so do we on Christmas eve. We come together to hear this ancient story, to sing carols and light candles, to find hope and inspiration. We suspend our reason and open our hearts. That is part of the magic of Christmas.

So tonight, let's bring that same openheartedness to the story of Mary and the visitation from the angel, when the angel Gabriel announces to Mary that she is to give birth to a savior. We are not as familiar with this part of the story, but it has much to tell us. You don't need to believe in angels or messages from God, to appreciate Mary's experience -her shock and dismay at this visit. She is a poor, young powerless female, likely 14 years of age or younger. A devout Jew. And she is called to do something extraordinary, something unimaginably challenging.

Luke does a great job setting the scene. The angel says Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you." The scripture tells us that Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be." You can read her suspicion clearly. It isn't every day that an angel stops by to say hello. I imagine that the people hearing this scripture

at the time would relate strongly to Mary's fear, confusion and distrust. What do you want from me?

Of course, Mary says yes. What choice did she have? This could be seen as a sign of obedience, and it is, but it is also a sign of courage. Here she is given a monumental task, with no clear plan, unclear expectations, and a great deal of uncertainty, and she says yes.

I am sure that there are those among us here that have been similarly called - whether by necessity, by circumstance, or by the spirit requiring us to do something difficult, something extraordinary, something that you may perceive to be beyond your ability. I think of the refugees in the world, leading their children away from the only home they have known, not knowing what is to come and how they will survive. Mary's challenge is a relatable human experience.

And so we hear about her journey to Bethlehem and Jesus's birth in a stable – a birth so significant that angels make the announcement and shepherds follow the star to find the babe.

In this part of the story, we don't know much about what is going on with Mary. Of course, we can imagine – the exhaustion of traveling on a donkey to an unfamiliar place when she is so close to giving birth, the fear about where they will stay, let alone fear of the unknown future with this child. As Allison helped us to appreciate, these are not trivial feelings, but the gospel doesn't spend much on them. Only after the shepherds arrive do we learn that "Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. Pondered in her heart is a great understatement. She had every reason to believe that she had just given birth to the messiah – the great savior of her people. Why else could these shepherds have found them? The image we are given in the creche is that all is calm, all is bright, all is well. But I can imagine her exhausted, overwhelmed self, feeling a combination of joy and fear. What could this mean? What will my life be like after this, what will his life be like?

How does one manage holding such joy and fear at the same time? What we do know from the scriptures that Mary was steadfast. She raised this child, encouraged him in his ministry, followed him as one of his disciples, and was by his side at his crucifixion.

An amazing story, but one that is told over and over again in the lives of every mother and child, dramatic in their own way. The courage to have a child, experiencing the miracle of birth, and the steadfastness to stay by their side to encourage them through difficulty and perhaps to death. A life woven with joy and fear.

Mary's story has something for everyone if we can take her into our hearts. A story that can resonate in our own lives. Mary lived in a time of empire, of oppression, where income disparities were great, where hope for the future was limited. And so do we. We live in extraordinary times. Whether we are called by the spirit to take on a task beyond our imagining, or simply trying to make choices that bend the arc of the universe toward justice, living on earth at this time take courage and steadfastness. It takes the strength to keep hope and joy alive, despite insecurity and fear. Courage to do what needs to be done, to answer the call however it comes. And steadfastness to stay the course with our values, our vision for a better future, our calling to shine the light on injustice wherever it may be.

Mary was a very young teen when she was asked to take on this momentous task. Many of our young people today are asked to take on challenges as well - they face a future of climate change, political instability, economic uncertainty. they are asked to strive for change without clear possibility of success. They are learning at an early age to live with both joy and fear.

Perhaps Mary did not have a choice to say no when the angel came to her, but she could have gone through the motions without true commitment. Like Mary, in our day we do not have the luxury to take a pass on the troubles of the world. We must manage our own despair and find our courage. We must learn to manage our fear and find our joy.

So I encourage you to take a little bit of Mary into your heart tonight. Let her story inspire you, encourage you. So that when you hear the call to make a difference however big or small, you will have the courage to say yes and the steadfastness to stay the course, despite uncertainty and fear.

Let the magic of this night fill you with hope at the possibility that you can participate in the birth of peace and justice in our world.

That we all can complete the work of Mary and Jesus, begun this night so many years ago.

So May it Be.