



## "Though the Darkness Hide Thee: Seeing is Believing"

Advent Sanctuary Worship Sermon Series – No. 3

Sermon by Rev. Patricia Farris

Luke 1:39-55

*In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry. "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord." And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever."*

Last Saturday morning, while the choir and orchestra were in the sanctuary rehearsing for the Christmas concert, two of our members— Dan Stirling and Todd Erlandson —were in the Courtyard setting up our annual nativity scene. I came back later in the afternoon for the marvelous CAST production of "Rumpelstiltskin." As I came from the parking garage over to Simkins Hall, I was walking behind a mom and her two little daughters. When they got to the Nativity scene, the younger girl squealed with delight. "Mom," she exclaimed. "They have sheep, and a lamb!" Not to be out-done, her older sister chimed in. "Mom---they're FAKE sheep!"

Clearly Christmas is one of those times of the year that indeed invites us into what Samuel Taylor Coleridge first named as "the willing suspension of disbelief." From Christmas pageants to Nativity scenes to scenes of snowy white Christmases, it's not just a cup of egg nog that causes our critical thinking to lighten up for a few weeks and enjoy the sheer delight of the miracles and magic of this season. Our hearts long for a generous serving of love and joy.

Even the church recognizes this every year on the third Sunday of Advent. By this third Sunday, we're half-way through this Advent season. In the early church, Advent was observed like a little Lent. It was truly a time of fasting and long hours of prayer, with an emphasis on repentance. By Week Three, everyone was ready for a hearty dose of joy.

So today we light the pink candle on our Advent wreath--pink for joy and pink for Mary, often symbolized as a rose. We light the pink candle of rejoicing and start Week Three of this season with joyful anticipation and expectation. And in so doing, we remember the joy of Mary. When the angel Gabriel told her that a special child would be born to her, she sang a song that begins with the words: "My soul magnifies, praises, the Lord, my spirit rejoices in God my Savior."

As we read in Galatians, Mary rejoiced in God and God rejoiced in Mary, for the "fullness of time had come" in the willingness of this young woman of faith to enable God to become one of us through the birth of Jesus.

You see, when it comes to Mary, we're not talking about "the willing suspension of disbelief." We're talking the power of fierce and insistent belief! We're talking a faith in God's promises that should take our breath away. We're talking a trust in God so deep that Mary could see something happening in her life, through her life, that would give glory to God and bring new light and hope for the whole creation.

In the announcement of this birth we learn, along with Mary, that God is doing something astonishing. God—the great God of all creation, the God of all time and all space, the God in whom is no beginning and no ending, the God beyond human imagining and telling--this great God, for our sake and for our salvation, chooses to become flesh, to become one of us, in the form of a child to be born. Unto us a son is born. Unto us a child is given.

No wonder Mary breaks out in song, which we've come to call The Magnificat. Those verses I read a few minutes ago from Luke's gospel are one of several songs that Luke includes in his telling of the story of Jesus—this song of Mary, and the songs of Zechariah and of Simeon. Most biblical scholars think that these songs were out there in the very early church even before the gospels themselves had been written and circulated around. These songs came out of the earliest faith of the Christian community and its worship. Their words tell the "good news" of what Jesus Christ meant to them. In very beautiful ways they pull together all the strands and layers and meanings of our faith.

"My soul magnifies or tells out the greatness of the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior," Mary sings, "for he has looked with favor on his servant, lowly as she is. From this day forward all generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me. His name is holy, his mercy sure from generation to generation toward those who revere him. He has shown strength with his arm, he has routed the arrogant of mind and heart. He has pulled down rulers from their thrones and lifted up the lowly. He has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty. He has come to the help of his servant, remembering his mercy, according to the promises he made to our ancestors."

What a song! My heavens!

If you know your Bible, you'll hear echoes here of Hannah's song in the second chapter of First Samuel. You'll hear echoes of Psalms 35 and 89 and of the prophet, Habbakuk. This song Mary sings pulls together the faith of the people that has sustained them for generations and adds their new affirmation of the Christ as Messiah. Mary sings this song to proclaim that Jesus is fulfilling all God's promises to Israel and all their yearnings for a different kind of life and different kind of world. As our familiar carol, "O Little Town of Bethlehem" puts it: "The hopes and fears of all the years are met in Thee tonight."

Our hopes, our fears...for us all is Jesus born. We all need this savior—to bring us help and hope and healing. And the world needs this savior. Especially in times of uncertainty and violence and fear, the world needs a savior. And that's what Mary's song proclaims. She sings to those, as Zechariah's song puts it, "to those in darkness and in the shadow of death. The dawn from heaven will break upon us, to guide our feet in the way of peace."

Mary. We don't know her lineage, her real parents. We don't know her credentials, her qualifications, or even her readiness to be a mom. Except for this: she trusted God. Mary could believe all this because her faith was deeply grounded in the Word of God and in the faith and steadfastness of her ancestors from generation to generation.

Her people had been waiting a long, long time for deliverance. And in this time, as Luke tells us, in the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod the ruler of Galilee, hope for the coming Messiah was running strong. It was in the air, in every conversation, that God would come to deliver the people Israel. No one knew just when, but their waiting was not in resignation, but in vibrant expectancy. Mary was ready to believe that indeed the fullness of time had come and that God would keep the promise to send a Messiah, ready to believe that love would be born into this world. As a woman of deep faith, Mary knew that what God would do for her, God would also do for all the people. Mary's song reveals that she has put the whole picture together. Mary believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord, that she would bear a son and that the child would be the Messiah. And she believed that God was fulfilling the centuries old promises to the people that the Messiah would come to bring liberation from sin of every kind—from selfishness and injustice, from misery and ignorance, from fear and broken hearts.

Mary's story shows us some very important things about our faith. Mary and this birth remind us that this faith of ours is deeply grounded in life, real life. Sometimes we think faith is about ideas that we need to believe in our minds, concepts, doctrines, propositions. Mary reminds us that faith is our response to God's love made visible in a human life that would know birth and growth and suffering and death and resurrection! Our faith is grounded in life.

Mary's story reminds us just how much God cares about human life. In choosing this poor, humble woman, God shows us a preference for all those who are nameless, who are marginalized, who are poor and afraid, vulnerable, often forgotten. Mary and Joseph were homeless travelers on the night of that holy birth.

And Mary embodies the compassion of God, the loving, tender heart of God, the infinite love of God. Across the centuries, around the world, Mary is revered by suffering people, sick and dying people, frightened people. Mary who, at the end, held the lifeless body of her son in her arms, is still to this day, a balm to mothers and fathers everywhere.

Maybe this is why God chose to come to earth in the form of a baby born to no-name parents. Maybe God chose something this ordinary and this familiar so that we would get that the point of it all has to do with light and love coming to each and every one of us. Maybe God did it this way so that every time we celebrate a birth, every time we baptize a baby, we look upon that great miracle and remember that nothing is impossible with God.

Maybe the great God of the universe knew that it wasn't enough for the light to shine in the darkness in general, or even for the night sky to glow with millions of stars. Maybe God knew that the light of love had to shine so brightly in one little face so that the rest of us would remember just how very much God loves each of us and loves this whole world.

That's the Good News, the Gospel of Jesus Christ, light of the world. That's the Good News that can grasp hold of us and give us strength to do whatever we're called to do.

Let us rejoice. Let us, with Mary, say "Yes" to the presence and power of God-with-us, Emmanuel. Let us sing loud praises to the God who comes to heal every brokenness and restore all creation to the fullness of its potential.

"For Christ is born of Mary, and gathered all above, while mortals sleep the angels keep their watch of wondering love. O morning stars together, proclaim the holy birth, and praises sing to God the King, and peace to all on earth!"