

December 13, 2015



“God is With Us: Love in the Midst of Mess”

Sermon by Rev. Patricia Farris

Luke 1:39-45

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 leapt 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 leapt for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.'

Traditionally, this Third Sunday of Advent is Mary's Sunday. We rejoice with her at the news of this birth and light the pink candle on our Advent wreath, the candle of Mary, the candle of our joy.

This morning's scripture story from Luke's Gospel is a beautiful story of what it means for us to trust that God is with us. Old Elizabeth, remember, has just learned that she is pregnant with a boy who is to be called "John," meaning "God is gracious," John who will prepare the way of the Lord. And then, lo and behold, her young cousin, Mary, is pregnant, too, she with a son who will be the Messiah. These two cousins, one old, one young, have been asked by God to believe some pretty astonishing things.

Elizabeth and Mary had much in common. They were faithful. They were both righteous in the sight of God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and requirements of the Lord. Their pregnancies were pretty miraculous, to say the least. The fact that Mary immediately journeyed to Elizabeth and Zechariah's home after Gabriel's visit, tells us that they had a close relationship. The journey from Nazareth to the hill country of Judea was some 80-100 miles, probably a 3-4 days trip. Mary made the trip quickly; perhaps to confirm the angel's message. That's not so different from what we do when something dramatic happens in our lives. We long to seek the company of those to whom we are closest.

When Mary arrived, as she entered the house, Elizabeth heard her greeting and was overcome by God's presence. The Scriptures say that she was ...filled with the Holy Spirit. She cries out with a loud voice: "Blessed among women are you, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what had been spoken to her by the Lord."

If we have heard this story many, many times, maybe we forget to be surprised, shocked even, at the willingness of these two to believe! They are believing something quite astonishing that God is doing. They are able to step out of whatever boxes their society might have put them in—a woman far too old to bear a son, a young unwed mother fearing shame and ostracism. Upon seeing Mary, Elizabeth asks: "Why do I have this honor, that mother of my Lord should come to me?"

I love what Madeline L'Engle in her book, *The Winter of the Heart*, says of this: "[This] is the irrational season when love blooms bright and wild. Had Mary been filled with *reason*, there'd have been no room for the Child." And so, with some minor questions about how all the details are going to work out, Elizabeth and Mary make room—in their hearts, in their bodies, in their minds, in their lives...they make room for God to be with us.

With the help of the Holy Spirit, Luke tells us, Elizabeth and Mary are able to see that God is breaking with tradition to do things differently. They are able to see beyond conventional wisdom to see what God is doing, to see what God's future will become. They are not locked in by the past nor by a "reasonable" view of "the way things are."

In fact, as one writer noted, "hope starts small, even as a seed in the womb, but it feeds on outrageous possibilities." So that it just may be, as Wendell Berry puts it: "...when we no longer know what to do, we have come to our real work, and when we no longer know which way to go, we have begun our real journey. The mind that is not baffled is not employed. The impeded stream is one that sings."

Through Elizabeth and Mary, God is doing a very *unreasonable* thing, an outrageous thing, because of love. God is coming to be with us. In this very world. In life as we know it.

God is doing something so astonishing that it would seem impossible to a "reasonable" human mind. 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.

For love, God becomes incarnate in a baby. The great all-powerful, all-wise, all-loving God, wanting to be seen, wanting to be known, comes to us as a baby laid in manger. God gives Godself to the world in this astonishing *unreasonable* way--in a baby, the most vulnerable being imaginable.

It doesn't really make "sense" to us any more than it did at first to Mary. It took her a little while to get from astonishment to joy. At first, she was skeptical, incredulous, amazed. After all, she knew herself to be a very ordinary person, one of us. 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. Perhaps another kind of God would have done things differently, would have had the savior be born in a royal household or in the capital city or at least to a mother known and admired and respected. Instead, the long-awaited Messiah comes as a baby born to a peasant family in an unlikely corner of the world, far from earthly palaces and courts of honor. Born in a stable and laid in manger because, as has been noted, no one would give up a bed for a pregnant woman.

Their world, the world Jesus was born into, was as harsh and scary as ours.

This past week I read a short piece on talking with our kids about San Bernardino. The advice is pretty much what we shared after Newtown, after Santa Monica, after Paris. But this was written in Advent. It's about choosing to love in the midst of mess and it goes like this:

"During this season of Advent, we are preparing our hearts for the coming of our Savior, Jesus Christ. His birth in Bethlehem over two thousand years ago did not happen on a silent night. He was born out of town and away from friends and family to a teenage girl during a confusing time of counting the people who lived in the country. He was born in a stable with cows mooing, horses neighing, donkeys braying, chickens clucking...you get the picture. That barn didn't smell like evergreen and cinnamon, either. The barn was messy; not the ideal place for a newborn babe. Not to mention, the Romans ruled in that day, and they weren't the friendliest folks around. Soldiers walked the streets and barked orders. The oppressed people of Israel longed for a Deliverer who would bring them freedom.

"On the night Jesus was born in that stinky barn in that mixed up world, the angels appeared to shepherds watching over their sheep in the field. Those men shook as they encountered the Heavenly Host. The first thing the angels said was, "Don't be afraid".

In the midst of this mixed up world of ours, those words are as important for us as they were for the shepherds: "Don't be afraid." ...we are challenged to respond in love.

Remember, "God didn't give us a spirit that is timid but one that is powerful, loving, and self-controlled" [as we read in Timothy.] But how do we show that love?

We can each choose to show love daily to [all] the people in our world. This is where living for Jesus becomes day-by-day, moment-by-moment. It's in the small things we do that we can demonstrate love to our family, friends and community. Choosing to love even in the midst of mess is powerful."

For love, God comes to be with us. This is what love looks like. Choosing to love even in the midst of mess.

Seems to me that that's our work in these times—to love in the midst of mess. Can we, like Elizabeth and Mary, grasp hold to the promises God has made to us? Can we open our hearts to love beyond measure? Can we learn to love in the midst of mess?

To love in the face of fear, violence, suspicion of those who seem to be different from us. God's love, born at Christmas, is for all of us. As we see in Luke's Gospel, God's love for us has nothing to do with our age—there's no "too young" nor "too old" in God's book. God's love for us has nothing to do with our education, our social standing, our achievements, our marital status. God's love for us has nothing to do with our fame, our celebrity, our wealth, our stuff. In fact, just the opposite. That's why God chooses to become incarnate in a babe who has nothing, except the love of the animals and the angels and his parents, homeless travelers on the night of that holy birth. A new little family who will soon be forced to flee to Egypt from the violence in their own country.

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 and this real 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.

Martin Luther once quoted another verse in Luke's Gospel to bring home this point. Luke 2:10: "the angel said to them: behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which shall be to all the people; for there is born to you this day a Savior, who is Christ the Lord."

Luther wrote: "In these words, you clearly see that he was born for us. [the angel] does not simply say: Christ is born, but *to you*. Neither does he say, I bring glad tidings, but *to you* I bring glad tidings of great joy.... *To you* is born and given this child."

So if you're feeling confused or fearful in the midst of all that is going on in our world, *to you* is born and given this child. Remember who and whose you are. Let Christ be born to you this Christmas, Christ who shows us how to love in the midst of mess, who shows us how to love, full on, unafraid. This is Emmanuel, God with us, for the living of these days.

AMEN

Notes:

Jan L. Richardson. *Night Visions: Watching the Shadows of Advent and Christmas*. Wanton Gospeller Press. Orlando, 1998.

Wendell Berry. "The Real Work," from *Standing by Words*. 1983.

"TALKING TO KIDS ABOUT SAN BERNARDINO" Tamara Fyke, December 7th, 2015

Martin Luther. "Sermon for Christmas Day." Minneapolis: Lutherans in All Lands Press, 1906.

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