

"God So Loves the World: Rejoice!"

Sermon by the Rev. Patricia Farris



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.

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

In the early church, when Advent was truly a time of fasting and long hours of prayer, with an emphasis on repentance, everyone was ready for a hearty dose of joy by week three. And so, the lectionary of scripture readings always brings a reading from the Epistles on the theme of "joy to the world." We heard Jill read it today from Thessalonians: "Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Do not quench the Spirit!"

That very early church in Thessalonica was full of new Christians. They were learning how to be church. They were trying to sort out what they believed and how to live it in very stressful times under Roman occupation. "Rejoice!" said Paul. "Do not quench the Spirit!" With these words, words still so compelling for us today, Paul is teaching his young, enthusiastic congregation in Thessalonica how to be followers of Christ, by taking their energy, their questions, their deepest hopes, and framing it in terms of the Christian life as joy, prayer, courage, and thanksgiving.

Rejoice, church. Rejoice, people of God, we hear anew this day. Though there is much that weighs heavy on our hearts, that weighs us down—even so...Rejoice! The thing that's spiritually challenging about this joy is that rarely do we see it when we look around, when we listen to the news. No, this joy comes from deep within. It is like an alpine lake whose waters come not from a river flowing into it from the outside, but from deep spring waters welling up from the inside from sources within the earth. This joy arises out of the love given to us by God in the birth of a tiny baby in an out of the way place to a mother of no status or celebrity whatsoever. God loves us. God loves the world. God is with us.

"How silently, how silently, the wondrous gift is given. So God imparts to human hearts the blessings of his heaven. No ear may hear his coming, but in this world of sin, where meek souls will receive him, still the dear Christ enters in."

Our readings from Luke's Gospel for this day pair what is called The Annunciation, that is God's announcement to Mary delivered by the angel Gabriel, with Mary's song, The Magnificat, so that both the young woman and her song testify to the power of God to turn expectations on end and bring new life out of unexpected places at the most unexpected times.

The great writer, Madeleine L'Engle, puts it this way, in her beloved poem, "First Coming": "God did not wait till the world was ready, till...nations were at peace. God came when the Heavens were unsteady and prisoners cried out for release. God did not wait for the perfect time. God came when the need was deep and great. God dined with sinners in all their grime, turned water into wine. God did not wait till hearts were pure.

"In joy God came to a tarnished world of sin and doubt. To a world like ours, of anguished shame God came, and God's Light would not go out. God came to a world which did not mesh, to heal its tangles, shield its scorn. In the mystery of the Word made Flesh the Maker of the stars was born. We cannot wait till the world is sane to raise our songs with joyful voice--for to share our grief, to touch our pain, God came with love: rejoice! Rejoice!"

In the announcement of this birth we learn, along with Mary, that 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, out of love 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. At first, she was perplexed, skeptical, incredulous, amazed. It took her a little while to get from astonishment to courage and then to joy.

But Mary says a powerful “Yes” to God and to life and to the whole world. It is she who enables the realization of God’s promise to bring the exiles home. It is she who says “yes” to the incarnation. And it is she, as the stories say, who traveled great distance with Joseph on a hard and exhausting journey, that they might be listed on the official roll of the Roman state. It is she who gave birth to her son in the strange “home” of a cattle shed and trusted the warm breath of the ox and the ass to keep him alive through his first night in his earthly home. It is she who will receive the Magi bringing their exotic and portentous gifts. It is she who will soon flee from Herod’s wrath, with Joseph and her newborn son, in order to keep him alive.

One biblical commentator observes that the courage of Mary’s YES to God that spurs all of us to muster the courage to “exit the realm of predictability.” “How can this be?” she asks the angel. “How can this be?”

Now I don’t know about you, but I am not the type of person who usually welcomes “exiting the realm of predictability.” I live by schedules and plans and lists. “Makin’ a list, checkin’ it twice!” I want things to happen in certain ways. I want life to be more predictable than not. When unexpected or unreasonable or inconvenient or painful things occur, I’m totally with Mary in asking “how can this be?”

But is this not also the question most of us ask of so many things that happen in this life, in this world? How can this be? In response to a medical diagnosis no one ever wants to hear? How can this be? To the death of a friend or loved one...how can this be? To fires raging across our state in what has become our year-round fire season....how can this be? To growing homeless encampments in our cities and isolated rural areas...how can this be? “How can this be?” is a refrain that runs through our lives.

Mary’s story invites us to a different way of approaching life. Our questions remain, to be sure. But through it all, God asks Mary to choose life, to choose to trust something that seems highly improbable, affirming that through God, nothing is impossible. It is in Mary’s response that we find a witness to deep faith and trust, like waters of life welling up from deep within. Trusting that, in God’s own time, God will stoop close to earth in love. Trusting that God is with us in all that may come, walking with us, carrying us through. Loving us back to wholeness. And trusting that because God wants justice and peace for this world, that God will choose to act through us, too, empowering us to prepare the Way in our own place and time. Trusting that God’s vision for us, for this very world, especially for the very things we cannot comprehend, is the truth, the power, the peace that will prevail.

The German theologian Jörg Zink put it this way: “We humans contribute to the world’s gloom, like dark shadows on a dark landscape... But now this man from Nazareth comes to us and invites us to mirror God’s image, and shows us how. He says: you too can become light, as God is light. What is all around you is...a world waiting to be filled with hope and faith. This world is your home as surely as the God who created and wrought it is love. You may not believe it, but you can love this world. It is a place of God. It has a purpose. Its beauty is not a delusion. You can lead a meaningful life in it. Once we perceive these truths, we will see the world with new eyes. Despite everything we see from day to day, it will reveal itself as a place where peace is possible, even through us. Our path through life will then turn from a journey over strange, dark terrain into one that passes through the light that is God. And we ourselves will be made fit to live in the light. When we open our eyes we will see it, and see our way forward.”

Oh...few of us are blessed by an angel visitation such as Mary experienced. Yet do we not dream dreams, see signs, feel a stirring in our soul that call us to respond with our own YES to God, exiting the realm of predictability and finding our way forward into a new future with God?

And if we believe that God has brought justice into the world, we live that justice. If we believe that God brought healing to the world, we live that healing and we share in making the world more whole. If we believe that God brings love into the world, we live that love.

Rejoice, people of God. For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace.

Thanks be to God. AMEN

Notes:

Raniero Cantalamessa, OFM Cap. “What joy is this?” Dec. 6, 2017: The Christian Century.
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Ashley Cook Cleer in Feasting on the Word: Year B, Vol. 1. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008.
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Jan L. Richardson. Night Visions: Watching the Shadows of Advent and Christmas. Wanton Gospeler Press. Orlando, 1998.

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