

Rev. Dr. Anne Bain Epling
First Presbyterian Church
December 19, 2021
Luke 1:39-55

“When the Impossible Happens”

It’s 6 days until the big day. A week from today we’ll come back and Christmas will be behind us. The presents we spent so much time selecting will have been unwrapped, the guests we spent so much time preparing for will have arrived, and the baking we spent so much time hovering over will have been consumed.

I will admit that it has been hard for me to get into the Christmas spirit this year, which is unusual for me. Terry and I love Christmas and have been known to over indulge in the season. But this year it’s been more muted for us. Maybe it’s been more muted for you, too. Perhaps our expectations were set too high for what Christmas would be like after . . . well . . . last year. Perhaps the heaviness of 2020 still lingers in the air and the fatigue we sometimes feel is more than just tiredness. Or maybe our minds are overwhelmed – 2021 has proven to be an overwhelming year, yes? And our spirits are just a little more dormant than usual.

I bring this all up because if you are feeling the same way, 1: you’re not alone and 2: you’ve come or tuned in on the perfect Sunday, because today we get to hear Mary’s lovely Magnificat, in which she bursts into a hope-drenched song that soars with promise not only for the child she carries, but also for Elizabeth’s, and indeed for all the world's poor, brokenhearted, forgotten, and troubled. "My soul magnifies the Lord," Mary sings, and then her song goes on to do just that.

And so I invite you to listen for the Word of God, as it comes to you, and just for you, today.

Read scripture.

It goes without saying that Presbyterians, and Protestants in general, don’t know what to do with Mary. We don’t pray to her, we don’t worship her, and except for Advent, we don’t really talk about her. Unlike our Catholic brothers and sisters, we don’t believe Mary was extraordinary. In fact, John Calvin – that great reformer – used to say the extraordinary thing about Mary is that she was

ordinary, a peasant girl, and someone who was sinful just like the rest of us but was included in God's work despite that. John Calvin said that Mary received the underserved love of God, just like the rest of us do – and that's what makes her extraordinary.

For some theologians, she's a teenage prophet who fearlessly announced the arrival of God's kingdom on earth. For others theologians, she represents a model of pious femininity – ever sinless, ever mother, and (drumroll please) ever virgin. It's the last one, of course, that causes most of us to stumble and (if you can believe it), the one I want to focus on today. And not because I want to talk about the virgin birth, but because I want to talk about what we believe to be true. For you see, most Protestants, not knowing quite what to do with a virgin birth, have either made it a fundamental tenet of the faith, which of course, it is not, or limited by our conceptions of what is and is not possible in the physical world, have allowed science to trump theology. I've come across my fair share of Presbyterians who cross their fingers behind their backs when we confess in the Apostle's Creed, "I believe in the virgin birth . . ." So what do we do with it?

Frederick Buechner once said:

If you believe God was somehow in Christ, it shouldn't make much difference to you how he got there. If you don't believe, it should make less difference still. In either case, life is complicated enough without confusing theology and gynecology. In one sense anyway, the doctrine of the virgin birth is demonstrably true. Whereas the villains of history can always be seen as the products of heredity and environment, the saints always seem to arrive under their own steam. Evil evolves. Holiness happens.

This matter of truth is an important topic every Sunday, but it's especially important during these high holy days such as Christmas or Easter when we're talking about things like a resurrection or virgin birth – does it matter if it's factually true how Christ entered the world and how he left it? Or can we believe it's still true without believing it's factually true?

A few years ago someone recommended to me a religious book. This book was written by a man who was an atheist and set-out to prove that everything Christianity believes in is absolute rubbish-just made up of fanciful stuff, things like the virgin birth and the resurrection. But in his zeal to disprove everything he

claims he actually found proof that everything really happened. In other words, he found “The Truth” with a capital T. It’s not a book I would recommend, because it’s based on the premise that one needs proof-documentary evidence-facts-to believe it’s all true. I say, “Rubbish to that. Where’s the faith?” Because faith is not something to be proved; it is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. Plus, facts don’t require any personal investment on our part. Once something is proven to be factually true, we can go about our business and not think much about it.

But faith is different. It requires an investment on our part, and asks us to use more than just our minds. Faith requires us to get our hearts and imaginations involved, too. Because while facts can tell us what something is, they can’t tell us what something means. Even if we could prove that everything in the Bible is factually correct, from 7 days of creation to Jonah getting swallowed by a fish to Jesus being born to a virgin, it still wouldn’t tell us what it all means. For me, it’s not so important whether Jesus was factually born to a virgin or not; what is important, is what it means to say that he was. And to me, that’s a theological question, not a gynecological question. What does it mean to believe that God came in the form of helpless baby to a young, poor, unwed girl? Do we believe that with God nothing is impossible, just like Mary proclaims, or do we believe that there are limits to what is possible with God?

Because, that my friends, is what this story is really about. It’s about God, not Mary. And it’s about truth. Is truth defined or limited by human understanding, intellect, science, and common sense? Or is there a truth bigger than human reason, a truth that transcends our ability to understand, a truth that flies in the face of reality?¹

In an oldie but a goodie, the late Marcus Borg points out in his book “Reading the Bible Again For the First Time”, that there are three stages of reading and hearing the Bible, which so many people turn to find the truth. We all start out in pre-critical naiveté, Borg says, in which we hear the stories as true. We take it for granted that whatever our teacher or parents or authority figures tells us to be true, is indeed true. So take for example the Christmas stories. Chances are you took it for granted they really happened the way the Bible says they do, that there

¹ John Buchanan, “What We Believe About Jesus: His Promise”.

really was a magic star, that the holy family really did journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem, that Jesus really was born in a stable and laid in a manger, that wise men came to visit, and that angels sang to the shepherds in the night sky. And it took no effort on your part. It didn't take faith. You simply had no reason to think otherwise.

But then, at some point we begin to question things and ask "Is this really factual?" This is critical thinking, and most everyone enters this stage. We begin to question (in the secular world) how Santa Claus could deliver presents to all the kids in the world in a single night. In terms of faith, we ask how can Jesus be born of a virgin? As critical thinkers we become suspect of these things, and so now it takes faith to believe things we would normally reject as true.

Borg points out that when we first enter critical thinking, it can seem like a liberating stage, realizing that all that stuff we learned as kids is up for grabs. But, he says, if you remain within the framework of critical thinking decade after decade after decade, and you can stay in it your whole life, it becomes a very arid place in which to live.

The last phase is one Borg calls post-critical naiveté, and sadly it's not a phase that everyone reaches. Many people never get out of the critical phase because they cannot hear a story that may not be factually correct but still believe that it is true.

Post-critical naiveté is the ability to hear these stories once again as true stories, even when you know they may not be factually true, because their truth does not depend upon their factuality. Post-critical naiveté is the ability to hear the Christmas stories once again as true stories, even though you're pretty sure that Jesus was born in Nazareth and not in Bethlehem, even as you're pretty sure that the magic star and the wise men themselves come from an exegesis of Isaiah 60. You know all of that, but you're still able to hear these as true stories, because they affirm that Jesus is the light coming into the darkness, and despite all the darkness, You believe that the Light is coming anyways and the darkness will not destroy it. (Marcus Borg, *"Spirituality and Contemporary Culture" lecture, June 1-3, 2000*)

In terms of Mary's story, you believe it's true not because you can prove she was a virgin, but because you believe nothing is impossible with God. I believe Mary's

story is true because I believe that somehow, some way, the powerful will be brought down from their thrones, and the lowly will be lifted up; that the hungry will be filled with good things, and those who don't help them will be sent away empty. I believe Mary's story to be true because I occasionally see these things come to pass, and I believe that one day, they will.

And I believe scripture is true not because it's filled with facts, but because

- despite the fatigue we may feel, God will lighten our load;
- that despite the times in our lives when the tasks of living feel so very heavy and our strength to carry it all fades away, God will come to bear our heavy burdens and our heavy sorrows;
- that despite the times in our lives when it feels impossible to catch up on all the things and we are buried by an avalanche that's been building, God will give us rest;
- that despite the times in our lives when the constancy of commitments feels like a burden and joy is hard to find, God will make us lie down in green pastures, lead us beside still waters, and refresh our souls.
- That despite the times in our lives when our minds can't escape the overwhelm, our hearts seem to be continually broken, our bodies fail under the weight of it all and our spirits are dormant, God's goodness and mercy shall follow us all the days of our life, and we shall dwell in the house of the Lord our whole life long.

This is why I believe Mary's story is true.

And this, my friends, is what Christmas is all about. Christmas has the courage to believe that with God, all things are possible. Christmas encourages us to believe that no matter what happens, no matter what bleak, miserable stuff life and the world throws at us, that God is coming. And not only is God coming, but God is coming for you.

This is the beauty of the God Mary proclaims, and I believe it to be true.

Friends, we may not get the Christmas we want, but we do get the God we need and the assurance that God comes to us even if our Christmas doesn't look like we hoped it would, and loves us despite how we may feel. In the midst of all the stress and turmoil, God chose Mary. And God chooses us, too. One of the names

we give to Jesus is “Immanuel”, which means “God with us”. God is with us not only when we are happy, successful, or healthy but in every time and in every circumstance.

And that, my friends, is the message this story brings – that no matter what, God is with us, and God can be trusted.

This Christmas, my prayer for you is this: as you go through the next week, that you will remember that God comes to you because God loves you, and God can be trusted to handle all of your unmet expectations, or plans that go awry. So trust God. And while you’re at it, share God’s love with other people and with the world. Because the world needs God’s love, God’s beautiful, inclusive, far-reaching, audacious, and outlandish love.

Amen.