

Anticipation: Mary

Isaiah 35:1-10

Crossroads Christian Church

Luke 1:26-38

December 11, 2016

3rd

Sunday of Advent

Maybe you saw it re-enacted in the movie "The Nativity Story" that we've been watching on Wednesday nights. Maybe you've seen it other movies about the life of Jesus. You may have seen it portrayed in beautiful paintings. You could have seen it in Christmas pageants, with a little girl Mary in blue bowing before a taller child angel with cardboard wings. You heard it read again in our Gospel lesson just a few moments ago. What words apply to that story about Mary and the angel? Awe, wonder, mystery, power, beauty, tenderness, obedience, trust, we could go on and on, but words can't do it justice.

Yet it's my job to try. In a little, dark, out-of-the-way corner of the world, in a village that looks like something out of the Flintstones, rough stone houses, steep rocky hillsides, people living in caves, lived a girl named Mary. She was a young woman, probably what we would call today a teenager. Her family had already arranged for her to marry Joseph, a village carpenter. So she had anticipated a simple, humble life, raising Joseph's children, and maybe, if things worked out, her family could travel to Jerusalem on a pilgrimage to visit the Temple there and make offerings to God. Ordinary girl, ordinary dreams, ordinary plans, ordinary life. Was she okay with that, or did her dreams go beyond the ordinary? Did she wish for more out of life? Did she have some intuition, kept carefully secret so people wouldn't think that she was crazy or uppity, that God had something special in mind for her?

We'll never know. Did she know then that through the angel Gabriel, God had transformed the life of her cousin Elizabeth, who lived near Jerusalem, where her husband Zechariah was a priest in the Temple? Did she know then that her aging cousin Elizabeth, who had never been able to bear a child, was six months along, expecting a son who would grow up to be a prophet? Had she heard that Zechariah had received word of all this in a vision, and that when he expressed doubt, the gift of speech was taken away from him? We don't know.

We don't know where or when the angel Gabriel appeared to Mary. Was it in her home, as many paintings show, or maybe outdoors in a quiet olive grove? Was it at midnight, high noon, or maybe at that mysterious time of half-light just before the dawn or after the sunset? We don't know.

What we do know is that Mary was alone, and then she wasn't. There was a Presence, a light, a movement of the air, and the little hairs on the back of her neck and the back of her arms stood on end. A figure appeared. Did she

humbly bow before it? Was she frightened that it might be a man who would force his way upon her, or was there something so holy in the air that she felt peace? The figure spoke. "Rejoice, favored one. The Lord is with you!" This wasn't the usual Shalom, or "Hey, how ya doing?" kind of greeting. Just like we would be, she was confused, maybe with a rising sense of apprehension, and definitely curious. What is going on here? What can his possibly mean? It was one of those "somehow my life is going to be very different now" moments.

Gabriel spoke: "Don't be afraid, Mary. God is honoring you. Look! You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great and he will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of David his father. He will rule over Jacob's house forever, and there will be no end to his kingdom." (Luke 1:30-33)

Now God saved Gabriel for the really important messages. He was an archangel—God's press secretary. How amazing it was when the angel greeted her, saying that she, Mary, had found God's favor. What an incredible, totally unrealistic thing that God was offering to do through Mary—through Mary, a child would be born who would save the world, who would turn the world on its ear.

Mary responded, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" Mary was puzzled. She wasn't objecting, just clarifying the details.

"The Holy Spirit will overshadow you, and the child you bear will be called holy. He will be God's Son," responded Gabriel. The Holy Spirit will overshadow. I used that line in a Christmas play and a teen girl, maybe about Mary's age, shuddered and said, "Ooh. That sounds scary." "Very scary," I said. God will make it happen. The Holy Spirit that breathed life into those lumps of clay we call Adam and Eve will breathe new life into a young girl's womb.

Gabriel then told Mary of his last assignment, his visit to Zechariah, and the promise of a child for Elizabeth. "Nothing is impossible for God," he said.

God had invited Mary to be an agent of God's promise. God gave Mary the option. And Mary accepted. "I am the Lord's servant. Let it be with me just as you have said." Mary said yes to God. Mary obeyed God. She could have said no. She probably knew that rumors would fly, that people would assume the worst, but their opinions didn't matter—God's will was all that mattered, and her chance to be an agent in God's plan.

It would not be easy. A single girl's pregnancy in that time and place was a scandal. We shudder when we hear today of "honor killings" in the Near East, when a father murders his own pregnant daughter for bringing shame on him and the family. Yet that was very similar to the custom back then. She could have been stoned to death. She could have been exiled and been

forced into a life of prostitution. Joseph could have denounced her and broken off the marriage agreement because of her unfaithfulness.

Mary knew that God would protect her, because God was working through her to change the world. That still didn't protect her from the whispers, from the hateful glances, from the pointed fingers, from the shaking heads. But Mary knew that the new life growing inside her wasn't the result of her sin, but of God's grace.

The Sunday before Thanksgiving I talked about what happened later, about Mary's trip to see her cousin Elizabeth and her husband Zechariah. I told of Mary's song of praise, what we call the Magnificat. I won't repeat it here now, but let me read you a list of God's attributes that Mary proclaimed in her song, as put together by United Methodist Bishop Ken Carter:

- God saves
- God blesses
- God does great things for us
- God's name is Holy
- God is merciful
- God desires reverence
- God is strong
- God hates pride
- God judges human leaders
- God is on the side of the oppressed
- God feeds the hungry
- God helps those who serve him
- God remembers
- God keeps promises.¹

Mary was quite the theologian, wasn't she? Some have called her Christ's first disciple. That time together with Elizabeth, sharing their hopes and joys and dreams together, was probably a time that Mary cherished for the rest of her life.

Later, Mary, carrying God's Son inside her, would join Joseph on a long, dark journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem. As her time drew near, she anticipated the joy of becoming the mother of our Savior. There, in Bethlehem, God's hidden promise would be revealed to one small part of the world as the baby was born.

Advent is a time of anticipation. It's a time for anticipating family gatherings and dinners, a time for children to anticipate visits from Santa and presents under the tree, a time to anticipate the beauty of a candle light Christmas Eve service, a time to anticipate new beginnings. We look back to Mary receiving the invitation to be part of God's plan to save the world, and of

¹ Bishop Ken Carter, "Call and Response," Day1.org.

her signing on to be part of that plan. From that point on, Mary's heart must have been full of anticipation. How would this play out? When and where would her baby, God's baby, be born? What would he be like? Would she have the wisdom and the love to nurture this child as he should be nurtured? What kind of man would he grow up to be? How would God use him to save the world? Mary wondered. Mary anticipated. We wonder. We anticipate. Amen.

By Michael E. Dixon