

Sermon for the Fourth Sunday of Advent, Year B
December 18, 2011
Scripture: The Annunciation of Mary
and the Magnificat from Luke's Gospel 1:26-38
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Today is Advent's final Sunday. Over the past three weeks all of our readings have come from the various "voices" found in the book of the prophet Isaiah, but today our lesson and response come from Luke's gospel as the focus moves to Mary becoming pregnant with Jesus. Even so, this story, too, like Advent itself, encompasses a global – dare we say a cosmic scope? - because Mary's story and her song known as the Magnificat, tell us that the implications of this pregnancy are for all of creation. Mary sings as one who knows that her child will have an impact on nations and history!

So with but a week to go, we Christians are still marking time as the days grow ever shorter and the weather gets colder with winter's start. It isn't Christmas yet, though our anticipation of it and our preparations for it are certainly at their height right now. For us, it is still Advent – still a time of waiting expectantly for the return of the Savior and the complete salvation of the world!

We are not there yet – at Christmas – but we relish being on the edge of "the revelation of the mystery," to quote the Apostle Paul in his letter to the Romans.

Every Sunday of Advent ultimately focuses on the End of All Things in the coming of Jesus Christ. In the previous three weeks we have encountered (or been confronted by) that End of All Things. We have seen it as a sudden, final, decisive, re-ordering of the world and of our lives as disciples, leading us to rejoice in the "meantime" where we live between Christmas as a fact of history and history's end and rebooting in Christ's coming again in power.

Today's lesson moves us from rejoicing to ecstatic praise, as we join Mary in her song and revel in the surprising news that God is and ever seeks to be in our midst, Emmanuel, God with us, intimately involved in our lives now and in the age to come. Both the story of Mary (our gospel lesson) and her song (in the Canticle we read and sang in response to the reading) are both from Luke, who alone of the Gospel writers gives us insight into these events.

These words call us to revel along with Mary in God's revolutionary salvation. They show us to what lengths God goes to show God's longing to be in our midst.

It was no less than Gabriel, an archangel in Hebrew angelology, who appears to this young, unwed but engaged girl to announce she would become pregnant by the Spirit of God and thus fulfill God's intention to establish David's line forever. Mary humbly and graciously consents to the angel's news. And it struck me that we gather here in worship each week in no small part because she did! And the worship we offer here each week is the worship of the One of whom Mary sang in her song at Elizabeth's house. I quote from the King James Version because so many settings of this song have used that version:

He hath regarded the low estate of his handmaiden . . .
and his mercy is on them that fear him from generation to generation.
He hath shown strength with his arm;
he hath scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts.
He hath put down the mighty from their seat
and hath exalted them of low degree.
He hath filled the hungry with good things;
And the rich he hath sent empty away
(*Luke 1:48-53, KJV*).

These are the reasons Mary's soul "doth magnify the Lord, and [her] spirit hath rejoiced in God [her] Savior." Mary's act of consent to God's plan to become flesh, fully one of us, unleashes not just praise in general, but praise for all that the coming birth will begin to unleash. The proud will be scattered. The mighty will be deposed. The humble will be enthroned. The hungry will be fed, and the rich will be left with nothing. I was struck this week by a paradoxical conjunction of two headlines on my Yahoo news page: one said "Almost half in U.S. are poor or low income," with a sub-heading that a record number of Americans are living in poverty or near-poverty, according to the latest census data. The other headline reports that six of Sam Walton's heirs have more wealth than the bottom 30% of Americans, or in the strange math this produces, Six Waltons equals 93,836,053 of the rest of us shmucks. Oh how we need for the proud to be scattered and the mighty deposed and the humble enthroned and the rich left with nothing!

This pregnancy for Mary was strange and surprising and life-giving. And just as she came to know, so we have come to know and believe that the coming One stirring then in her womb and waiting to be born among us will stir up

these same results in the life of the world both in this age and in the age to come. This is what God-with-us in Jesus Christ was up to throughout his entire ministry scattering the proud rich and enthroning the humble poor. That is what he also revealed in his execution and resurrection, and it is what Christ, ascended, and the Spirit among us continues to work out in our midst. And perhaps most important of all, this is what Christ will bring to fulfillment when he comes again.

With Mary's song, the song of God's salvation, on our lips and in our hearts, we ponder how we can enter into God's realm of justice and peace. Where do you see events among us bearing witness to the strength of God's arm scattering the proud, overthrowing the powerful, exalting the lowly, feeding the hungry and leaving the rich to fend for themselves? That's not the ends the powerful in this world expect or want, but those are the topsy-turvy ends that God intends in the End of All Things we know in Jesus Christ.

In the meantime, we are invited to join Mary's song and to find ways, compelling ways to consent with Mary to let God be born in us, to respond as Mary did – let it be to me according to your word.

Oh, I know I have been hounding you a lot about Advent and about how Advent isn't Christmas. I know that Advent just a minor sideshow out there in the world, if it's that at all. And I know, too, that here in the church, where we try to take Advent seriously, the messages that we have heard may seem confrontational and challenging and even frightening. I suspect Mary experienced feelings like that too, but I believe she also heard what lay beneath. She listened deeply, we might say, to what it was that God was saying and doing in and through her, and she came to trust and to follow where she was being lead. I'd like to think that all those passages from Isaiah which we have heard this Advent season, and now this powerful story of Mary, have conditioned us to listen deeply as well, to hear what lies beneath, and to receive the whole mystery in Jesus Christ – his incarnation, his life, his teaching, his execution, his resurrection and his return – and to receive all of this in such a way that doesn't panic us, but rather transforms us by the mystery so revealed. Mary's song celebrates that possibility for us – of an End of All Things far stranger, far more surprising, and far better than we could ever have imagined ourselves.

In one of the "All in the Family" episodes that aired a number of years

ago now, Edith and Archie Bunker are attending Edith's high school class reunion. Edith encounters an old classmate by the name of Buck who, unlike his earlier days, had now become excessively obese. Edith and Buck have a delightful conversation about old times and the things that they did together, but remarkably Edith doesn't seem to notice how extremely heavy Buck has become. Later, when Edith and Archie are talking, she says in her whiny voice, "Archie, ain't Buck a beautiful person." Archie looks at her with a disgusted expression and says: "'You're a pip, Edith. You know that. You and I look at the same guy and you see a beautiful person and I see a blimp.'" Edith gets a puzzled expression on her face and says something unknowingly profound, "Yeah, ain't it too bad."

Advent invites to listen deeply, to hear what lies beneath, and to see what cannot be seen, and "ain't it too bad" the whole world can't see it as well? Ain't it too bad that the world hasn't full chosen yet to participate in the future which God intends, an end to this era of war and violence, injustice, and oppression, and the transformation into a world of justice and peace? Edith Bunker could look beyond the outward and see what matters inside. So could Mary. She could see it, it being the new world a-comin'. And we can too if we

join in Mary's song. But we must sing it as Mary did, not just with our lips, but with our lives.

In his poem THE HOUSE OF CHRISTMAS, the poet GK Chesterton (1874-1936) wrote:

There fared a mother driven forth
Out of an inn to roam;
In the place where she was homeless
All men are at home.
The crazy stable close at hand,
With shaking timber and shifting sand,
Grew a stronger thing to abide and stand
Than the square stones of Rome.

For men are homesick in their homes,
And strangers under the sun,
And they lay on their heads in a foreign land
Whenever the day is done.
Here we have battle and blazing eyes,
And chance and honour and high surprise,
But our homes are under miraculous skies
Where the yule tale was begun.

A Child in a foul stable,
Where the beasts feed and foam;
Only where He was homeless
Are you and I at home;
We have hands that fashion and heads that
know,
But our hearts we lost - how long ago!
In a place no chart nor ship can show
Under the sky's dome.

This world is wild as an old wives' tale,
And strange the plain things are,
The earth is enough and the air is enough
For our wonder and our war;
But our rest is as far as the fire-drake swings
And our peace is put in impossible things

Where clashed and thundered unthinkable wings
Round an incredible star.

To an open house in the evening
Home shall men come,
To an older place than Eden
And a taller town than Rome.
To the end of the way of the wandering star,
To the things that cannot be and that are,
To the place where God was homeless
And all men are at home.

Yes, it's still Advent. In fact it's really always Advent because we live in this "meantime" between God coming in time and Christ's coming again at the End of Time. And in the "meantime," we are invited to sing Mary's song, not just by mouthing the words, but by singing out God's justice and peace with our lives until "all men are at home." We sing Mary's song because what Gabriel asks of Mary is what God asks of each of us. You see, it lies within our power of choosing to conceive the God who chooses us. As Barbara Brown Taylor says, we are all meant to be mothers of God, to do what we sing:

"O holy Child of Bethlehem, descend to
us, we pray;
cast out our sin, and enter in; be born
in us today."

We are invited to stand and sing with Mary and be summoned to an adventure filled with surprise and

mystery and peril and misunderstanding and grief, and joy, profound joy, joy beyond anything we could ever imagine. Oh, I suppose God could have chosen to save the world and to fulfill God's promises of old all by God's Self; after all, nothing is impossible with God. But this humble yet earth-shaking conversation we heard today between an angel and a young peasant woman named Mary tells us that God wants us to be part of the effort.

It is true that without God we can do nothing, but it is also true that without us God will do nothing. As St. Augustine's brilliant aphorism goes, God without us will not; we without God cannot. Or as Borg and Crossan repeatedly say in their powerful examination of THE FIRST CHRISTMAS:

"God will not change us as individuals without our participation, and God will not change the world without our participation" (p. 242). We who have seen the star and heard the angels sing are called to participate in the new birth and new world proclaimed by Jesus' coming.

What good, what possible good, could it be for us if Mary is full of grace if you and I are not also full of grace? And what possible good is it to us for the Creator to give birth to his Son if we do not also give birth to him in our time

and our culture? Mary's story is our story. Her song is our song. We all know that we are just a little community here at Congregational United Church of Christ. I like to say that we are a mustard seed church, small but full of promise. Here in this Advent season, then, pregnant with hope, we know that in the days ahead, we are going to watch for the promises of God to unfold in our lives and the life we share in community. We are going to help one another search for meaning; we're going to share our stories and walk alongside one another. Sometimes, we'll just sit in the dark quiet and wait, together, trusting in the promises of God, listening for a word from the Stillspeaking God. And in the midst of our waiting, as Mary sang God's praise, we will rejoice. God is with us. God's promises are true. We are on the brink of great things. Jesus is the way to truth and life – the way to a different kind of life and a different kind of future, for us and for the world. May our following Christ bring us to say with Mary, let it be to us according to your word, O God. Let it be.

A prayer by Eric Milner-White, Dean of Yorkminster Cathedral in England from 1941 until his death in 1963, expresses our Advent hope. Will you pray with me?

O Lord, your wondrous birth means nothing unless we are born again,
Your death and sacrifice mean nothing unless we die to sin,
Your resurrection means nothing if you be risen alone.

Raise and exalt us, O Savior, both now to the estate of grace and hereafter to the state of glory; where with the Father and the Holy Spirit you live and reign, God for ever and ever. Amen.