

**Sermon: December 10, 2017 – Advent 3 – Luke 1: 26-38**  
**Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore AB – Rev Greg Wooley**

Surprise!

Surprises can come in all shapes and sizes:

This (surprise party)

This (the Oscar goes to...the other person)

This (pregnancy test)

On this third Sunday of Advent, the Sunday of Joy, we hear of a surprise that had elements of all of the above. Theologically, it's party time – we rejoice in the good news of God's personal, embodied connection with those willing to birth the promise of a world made new; but if viewed from Mary's standpoint there is much ambivalence here, which unfolds beautifully in Luke's narrative as Mary goes from utter disbelief, to sizing up the evidence, to a humble and noble acceptance. This surprise announcement causes us to go deep into our understandings of self and life and God, and if we allow it to, can tip some of our stoutest disbelief into a new day of joy.

This is the point of today's sermon when I will attempt to walk a very tricky tightrope: that moment when a man talks about the particular blessings that women bring into the world through childbirth. If I could Skype Shannon in from her pulpit in Calgary at this moment, trust me, I would do so, but it looks like I need to forge ahead in fear and trembling. For I want to simultaneously celebrate the amazing ability of female physiology, to carry and then deliver new life to the world, while lamenting the way that some theologies can limit the value of women to only that child-bearing role.

Twenty-nine years ago, as a new Dad of twins I was immediately thrust into a nurturing role, which has been, without a doubt, the most significant shaper of who I am as a person... but I was and remain acutely aware that I didn't carry them inside for nine months, I didn't go through the emotional and hormonal and physical changes that a pregnant mom goes through. I hear the amazing writings of women who have given birth, describing their connection through that process to mother earth, to the eternal cycle of birthing and becoming, and am dumbstruck with awe at a process that my body cannot fully understand. And so I hear of this partnership forged in the first chapter of Luke, between a God whose love could no longer be held at arm's length from the world, and a humble teenaged girl whose reputation and life would potentially be placed in great peril, and I marvel at the resilient, creative, transformative capacity of Mary, to carry and birth and nurse and nurture.

And yet, I recoil at what has happened to Mary over the centuries, being reduced to not much more than a holy vessel containing the Christ Child. In the gospel she is very human, but centuries of reverential doctrine have exalted that humanity into oblivion. In the same way that many economies in our day continue to be based on the assumption that a woman's career is an afterthought to her child-bearing role, the Church has in many ways looked away from Mary's personality, her courage, her resolve, her willingness to question, focusing instead on her unblemished purity as if that were the one thing that really matters about her.

So this morning I want to celebrate Mary's birthing of the promise, her ability to carry and deliver and nurse and nurture the love of Christ into the world. I want to honour the humanity that connects her story to ours. Throughout scripture, unlikely heroes keep emerging, from the midwives who kept baby Moses from being killed, to David, the least likely choice for King, and Mary steps nicely into that tradition. As you likely know, there is significant debate about the term "virgin" related to Mary, which we can trace back to a passage in Isaiah, chapter 7 about a "young woman who is with child," which got picked up by the ancient Greek Septuagint translation as a "virgin who will be with child," but I think it can actually strengthen our connection to this story to see Mary as a virgin because it says this: if you think God can't use YOU to do something wonderful in this world, if you figure there is something about your past or your personality that precludes you from embodying the love of Christ, just take a look at this! If SHE can do THIS – and if her kinswoman Elizabeth, who had given up on ever conceiving, is also pregnant - what exactly is it that you're saying you can't do? To be honest, my faith does not rest, even a bit, on the virginity of Mary, but I do put quite a bit of stock in the way that both she and her relative Elizabeth,

mother of John the Baptist, exemplify anyone who is willing to give her entire self to the task of bringing love into the world, regardless of the barriers, regardless of its supposed impossibility.

Mary, as one who recognizes the angel, questions the angel, and eventually chooses to embrace the task proposed by the angel, sets the footsteps of those who have heard the call of her son, Jesus, in their lives. It may take us a while to recognize Christ in our midst, and the task, large or small, that is set for us may seem like something we are ill-suited to. The easy familiarity of the way things are may keep us from giving much of a “yes” to speaking Christ’s word of love into a world addicted to dividing the world into bosses and servants, strong and weak, winners and losers. Our call to discipleship is not just an aside to an unchanged life; it is nothing short of the embodiment of Christ’s compassion and courage as we seek to birth a new realm of love and inclusion and reconciling grace. With Mary, we size up the call to be love in the world and, hopefully, arrive at something resembling the answer “yes.”

Debie Thomas, a Christian essayist living in northern California, has written a fine essay about Mary entitled, “The Pause before Yes.” In it she writes,

“[There is a] gap between Gabriel’s title for Mary (‘favored one’) and the task he assigns her. Tradition tells us that Mary was probably thirteen or fourteen years old when the angel appeared to her. We know that in first-century Jewish culture, a girl who became pregnant out of wedlock faced grave danger. At the very least, she became an object of widespread scorn. At the worst — as in contemporary cultures which practice honor killings — she risked being stoned to death by the very villagers who raised her. To say “yes” in this instance was to give herself over to scandal and ostracism. It was to put everything — her reputation, her marriage, her very life — on the line. And *this* is the special honor God bestowed on [God’s] ‘favored one’?”

“This gap in the Annunciation story warns me that God’s ‘favor’ is not the [soothing] thing I’d like to believe it is. It’s not *God*...who equates divine favor with wealth, health, comfort, or ease — that’s just *me*, getting it wrong. Mary’s ‘favored’ status led her straight from scandal to danger to the trauma of her son’s crucifixion. God’s call required her to be profoundly countercultural, to trust an inner vision that flew in the face of everything her community expected of her. As the years passed, and her son’s enemies multiplied, Mary’s ‘yes’ demanded a degree of courage that makes me tremble as a mother. Let’s not deceive ourselves: it is no benign thing to be ‘favored of God’.”

Indeed, it is no benign thing to be favoured of God... but that is what it means, for us to embody the saving power of Jesus in a world that is too arrogant to believe it needs to be saved from anything. That’s what it means, to choose to live by the selfless power of love rather than the self-serving power of greed or protectionism. That’s what it means, to be those who gather at table to touch and taste physical reminders of giving our lives to the power of love and life and light. On this third Sunday of Advent, when JOY is the keyword, we remind ourselves that the joy Christ brings becomes joy only as it reaches out to all people, not just those to who figure they deserve it. God’s favour begins to reach out where and when it is least expected, through the least honoured servants, in the most persistent yet unseen ways, as love gestates within those who are willing to say a trembling “yes” to the God of life.

And so we are invited: to carry, to be filled, to birth, to redefine the meaning of JOY as we live God’s life in the world. As we prepare for Christmas, may we ponder, with Mary, the fullness of truly embodying this astonishing gift. Thanks be to God, Amen.

References cited:

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