

December 18, 2011

Luke 1: 26-38

First Parish UCC, Brunswick, ME

Mary E. Baard

Bearer of God

most.

INTRO TO SCRIPTURE:

Each Sunday this month we are looking at part of the opening chapter of one of the gospels. Two weeks ago we considered the gospel of Mark, which opens with John the Baptist preparing the way for the one to come. Last week we heard from the gospel of Matthew, which tells the Christmas story through the lens of Joseph. Today we are turning to the gospel of Luke, which tells the Christmas story through the lens of Mary. (As I told the Confirmation youth, parents tend to tell the story of a birth from different perspectives.) Chapter 1 of Luke is very long and interweaves the stories of the gestations of both John the Baptist and Jesus. Our reading today tells of the angel Gabriel's visitation to Mary, announcing the child she will bear

SERMON

Advent is that breathtaking space between what has been and what is to come.

In this season where we are often anxious about getting everything right - the right gift, the right Christmas card, the right tree and the right menu, Advent invites us to take a deep breath and remember that God did come, does come, and will continue to come into the midst of our messy and broken world - in other words into our real lives. Even if this is a year we are not "up for" Christmas, Christmas still comes. In fact it is probably the times that we're not "up for it" is when we need Christmas the

Madeline L'Engle in her poem "First Coming" put it this way,

God did not wait till the world was ready,
till...the 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 Word made Flesh
the Maker of the stars was born.
We cannot wait 'til 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!

We too live in a time where the need is deep and great. A time where there are many challenges including the moral choices embedded in our budgets - family, church, state and national. At each level we live with the tensions between available resources and incredible human need. Particularly

we have seen the challenge of these decisions this week right here in Maine in the conversations and conflict about the health care program, Maine Care. We wonder will there be no room at the inn for some of our citizens in the near future?

Mary, mother of Jesus, lived in a time where the need was deep and great. She lived in a territory occupied by the Roman Empire. She was not a full citizen, not recognized as a full person, in so many ways - being a Jew, a woman, and young. Such a tenuous vessel for such an extraordinary calling.

Frederick Buechner, in his book *Peculiar Treasures*, offers this twist on today's gospel lesson: "She (Mary) struck the angel Gabriel as hardly old enough to have a child at all, let alone this child, but he'd been entrusted with a message to give her and he gave it. He told her what the child was to be named, and who he was to be, and something about the mystery that was to come upon her. 'You mustn't be afraid, Mary,' he said. And as he said it, he only hoped she wouldn't notice that beneath the great, golden wings, he himself was trembling with fear to think that the whole future of creation hung now on the answer of a (this) girl."

As the story goes,
Mary, most likely with great fear, but in spite of her own fear, says, "Here I am."
As she is called in Orthodox tradition, Mary is Theotokos, "God - bearer."

In reading the Christmas stories we often trip over the puzzling claim of divine conception. And it is a good question to ponder. However, this was not such a particularly unusual claim in biblical

times. In fact for the early church it was the other claim in the Christmas stories, the claim that Jesus was born of a woman, that could be a significant stumbling block. Could God really be held in the womb of a woman?

Fourteenth century theologian and mystic, Meister Eckhart, offers a very challenging and expansive answer to that question. He suggests that not only was Mary a God-bearer, but in fact each of us is also called to be a "mother of God." He reminds us that "God is always waiting to be born in us," so that we may embody that presence one to another.

I received the gift of that presence recently from one of our church school children. Soon after we announced that Susan Fitzgerald was dealing with cancer, this child was in the church office. She had checked the "Caring Thoughts" board we have for prayer concerns and, noticing that Susan's name wasn't there, said to me, "Don't you think Miss Susan's name should be on the Prayer Board?" I agreed with her that it definitely should be and suggested that she write it on the board for us, which she did. Sometimes a child shall lead them, embodying the presence of God in our midst.

Mary, mother of Jesus, has always been a inspiration of solace and compassion for people. Maybe you've heard the tongue-in-cheek pearly gates story that goes like this. One day in heaven Jesus approached Peter at the pearly gates. Jesus suggested that maybe Peter hasn't been quite up to his job, since some of the people getting into heaven seemed to be highly questionable. Peter replied, "I know. But what am I to do? I turn them away, but they go around to the backdoor, talk to your mother, and she

lets them in.”

Ah,...Mother Mary...full of grace, from which came grace.

In this season of bearing gifts, Mary reminds us that the real gifts come from within us. From an unknown writer comes this reflection, “Christmas Shopping for the Good Stuff.”

I am flat broke from overspending at Christmas time. But I need to go shopping again soon because I am completely out of self-respect. I've said things I wish I could take back and I am not feeling too good about myself.

I also want to exchange a carton of self righteousness for an equal amount of humility. I hear that it is less expensive and wears well, and while I'm at it I'm going to check on tolerance and see if there is any available in my size.

I must remember to try to match my patience with the little I have left. My neighbor is loaded with it and it looks awfully good on her. I was told the same department has a repair shop for mending integrity. Mine has become frayed around the edges from too much compromising. If I don't get it refurbished soon, there won't be any left.

I almost forgot the most important thing of all – compassion. If I see some – no matter what the color, size or shape – I'm going to stock up heavily regardless of the price. I have run out of it so many times and I always feel ashamed when it happens. I don't know why it has taken me so long to get around to shopping for these items.

In bearing these kinds of gifts -

expressing compassion and working for justice - we indeed are “bearers of God.” Poet Jan Richardson expresses God's invitation to us in this way.

Not to one
but to many (O God) you have called:
come
on the dancing wind
come
from the deepest forest
come
from the highest places
come
from the distant lands
come
from the edge of darkness
come
from the depth of fear
and become
the bearer of God.

~Jan Richardson, Night Visions