

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor
Sermon for the Fourth Sunday of Advent, December 18, 2011
Lessons: Amos 7:10-15 and Luke 1:26-38

BORN IN OBSCURITY, LIKE US

Our reading from the Gospel of Luke is called in church tradition *the Annunciation*, the announcement to the young woman Mary that she will bear a child who will be the one to fulfill God's promise to Israel and all the earth. In the Middle Ages and even earlier, the focus on Mary shifted, and elements that were secondary became primary. Seeking to control as well as comfort its people in a time of wretched poverty and ignorance, the church presented Christ more and more severely as the judge who would come to assign all to their eternal destiny in heaven or hell. Faith became motivated by desperate hope for a better place and fear of an even worse place of fire and eternal torment. As greed increased among the rulers of the church, fear dominated the landscape of Christianity, and as Christ the judge became more terrifying, the people needed an advocate – a softer, more compassionate figure of comfort. They needed someone on their side, with understanding – someone approachable to whom they could pray without feeling judged. So, Mary rose in the people's minds, and in the church's secondary teachings, she became the compassionate heart of God, the long-suffering mother who endured harsh words from her divine Son but never let herself turn bitter. Mary became for the people the guarantor that heaven had a heart for them.

The Protestant Reformation turned against Mary with all the force and fury of reformers smashing idols. The secondary stream of Christian thought called Mariology – the study of the Virgin as the mother of God's Son or even the "Mother of God" – came in scornful response to be called by Protestants "Mariolotry," from the word "idolatry." Having been elevated too high, Mary was now attacked as a false goddess to be toppled.

But even the Protestants would not let Mary be. Biblical literalism fixated upon the virgin birth as though believing *in it*, literally, were necessary to faith in Jesus as our Savior. The virgin birth does not make Jesus anything he would not be otherwise. Jesus is not made the Son of God by the nature of his birth; he is God's Son. Neither is he miraculously exempted from human nature, as though sin were sexually transmitted; he is as human as you or I. The difference between Jesus and us is that he lived by God's grace, as God created humanity to live.

So, we have layer upon layer of accumulated crust to scrape away to find this young woman who entrusts her life to God's will and becomes Jesus' mother. She is neither the

“Queen of Heaven” nor the shameful object of Christian idolatry. She is neither to be worshiped nor despised. This morning, our children lit a candle for love. So, let’s talk about Jesus’ birth and his young mother-to-be in that light.

Mary’s problem believing what the messenger tells her is called a block or a stumbling-block to faith. It’s a reason people give to say why God cannot really be serious about calling them to service. Moses tells God he can’t be the right man for the job because he is halting in his speech, and God clearly needs someone eloquent to speak to the pharaoh of Egypt and tell him to let the children of Israel go free. Jeremiah protests that God is clearly mistaken in calling him to be a prophet to the rulers and people of Jerusalem because he is still just a youth, and certainly God needs a more mature and distinguished, even venerable, man for that job. In Luke’s story, Mary is quite understandably bewildered because she’s old enough to know the “facts of life.” She can’t be pregnant because she knows the necessary prerequisite. “Uh, God, it sounds wonderful and all, but you seem to be overlooking something here.” She’s not refusing, just wondering how it can be true.

Modern scientists, I’ve been told, can in the laboratory scratch an egg and fertilize it with no male involvement. The miracle of Jesus’ birth is elsewhere than the conception, and it is in the real miracle of it that we will find ourselves encountered by the astounding, life-changing love of God. But in the story, Mary accepts that what had seemed impossible will happen simply because God is the one who will make it happen, and she entrusts herself to God’s will which cannot be blocked or thwarted by human limitations. In fact, our humanity with all its weaknesses, embarrassments, and limitations is exactly what this birth is all about. In this human person born as we all were born, God is going to experience human life and death to the full, as we experience them, only more so. God will know most personally how it feels to be one of us.

And God’s Son will not be a privileged or sheltered one of us. Jesus was born in obscurity and lived his life in a backwater region of the Roman Empire. Even the more sophisticated Jews in Jerusalem had no great regard for Galileans, who spoke with an accent, and certainly the masters of Torah in the Temple establishment were unimpressed by the self-styled rabbi from the boondocks. From Jesus’ actual lifetime, Rome, as far as we know, made one and only one mention of him: that he was crucified.

So, when do we start talking about love or even peace on earth and goodwill? We are talking about love, in love’s extreme. What does God know of our struggles let alone our defeats down here on earth? What has the Almighty experienced of weakness, the All-Knowing of confusion and doubt, the Everywhere-Present of feeling lost and alone in life? What does God know of regret for failures, mistakes, hasty words spoken in anger, or missed opportunities that will not come again? Does God ever receive praise with our human

embarrassment because secretly God feels like a fraud and fears what people might say if they knew the truth?

And there's the other side, too. Does God know the simple joy of laughter, the comfort of a sympathetic touch, the refreshment of cool water on a hot and sticky day, or the relief of sleep at the end of hard work? How can God know the feeling of being tired or frustrated or bored? Can God be surprised? Or more importantly, can God be grieved?

The prophets told us God could be angered, frustrated, and, yes, grief-stricken, but they only said so, and it seems to us as though such feelings are just metaphors – human-style images for things ethereal, divine, painless, and beyond our comprehension. Nothing like what we feel, being bodies of flesh and blood, nerves, muscles, and bones.

The great mystery we, in our faith lingo, call the Incarnation – the “becoming flesh” of the Word of God – happened in the ordinary birth of a child in almost total obscurity. Who knew? Who cared? God did in person what I believe God had done within God's own Self from the beginning: God committed irrevocably to this created world and to the human creature made in God's own image and likeness. Time and again, God refused to have a future as God without us, but we didn't get it because we did not want to get it. People preferred to keep God at arm's length. They would worship, make offerings, maybe even obey to some extent as long as obedience didn't get too inconvenient, but let themselves be loved with a love that would transform them and change everything? No, thank you. That was, for most, too much. Blessings are great – the more the better, because blessings are benefits, and we're always open to those. But when the Giver comes with the gift, that's more than humanity has wanted.

Here's what I believe. I believe that when God looks at us, God sees Jesus standing with us in whatever condition we are in. So, God sees Jesus happy and joyful with us, sick and in pain, addicted, drunk, angry, fighting, running scared, or crying with us – because God sees us with him. What we do to ourselves and to each other, we do to God's Son. And God's love for that Son surrounds us, and we are part of it now – bound with Jesus in a bond he refused to let even disgrace or death break. In this is love: that he laid down his life for us, to make us daughters and sons of God with him. Jesus is God's living insistence upon getting through to us; he is God's most personal refusal to give us up and quit caring about us, no matter how much it hurts. That's what divine love is. That's what God put into our human flesh to be now and forever *God with us*. Amen.