

Advent 4

December 20, 2020

Luke 1:26-38

The Reverend Melissa K. Hollerith

Christ Church, Georgetown

In the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Do you have a favorite Bible story? I ask my students this question often. The old standards on their list are always Noah's Ark or David and Goliath. Many also name the Nativity story. Stories are important because they shape the kind of people we become. They give us a lens by which we can see the world, and as Christians, it's important that we pass along the great biblical stories to the next generation. The Church places the Bible at the center of its worship because we believe that the stories we find in it will shape our lives in holy ways. The stories of the Bible help us to see the world through God's eyes, through Jesus' eyes; they teach us about God's kingdom and how to live a good life.

In this morning's gospel reading we have the story of young Mary being visited by the Angel Gabriel, who announces that Mary will give birth to the Son of God. I do love this story. I love Mary's faithfulness, her willingness to let it be so, even though she knows it is biologically impossible, even though she knows it will no doubt complicate her relationship with Joseph. With great humility, she accepts the mantle of being the Christ-bearer and all that it implies. What are some of the truths we should glean from this story? What does God want us to learn from this Bible story?

First of all, we learn that all things are possible with God. Randy and I waited seven years before we heard the good news that we would be having a child. It was a miracle for us, maybe not of

biblical proportion, but it certainly felt that way. I felt like Sarah when she learned she was expecting Isaac. I learned I was expecting during Advent. All of a sudden Mary's story felt so similar to my own. I was experiencing my own miracle. My dad, who was an OB/GYN, said that whenever someone gives birth, they are given the opportunity to help God perform a miracle, and I believe there's truth in that.

Second, we learn from this story what it means to be faithful and obedient, even when we are afraid. Through Mary's story we learn to trust, even when it seems so unlikely. In Mary's faithfulness to God, we see a model for the way in which we should respond when we are called by God, called to love our neighbor, to welcome the stranger, to care for the hungry, to comfort the lonely. There's always risk involved, but God calls us to be faithful. How will we answer? Will we respond as Mary did? Will we answer as the disciples did when they dropped their nets and followed Jesus? How might we hear God's call? What is it like to discern how the Holy Spirit might use us? These are questions we need to pray over and ponder, just as Mary did in her heart.

Third, besides learning that all things are possible with God and what it means to be faithful, this story teaches us that God can transform us if we allow Him. Will Willimon, former Chaplain at Duke University Chapel, tells the story of a student who came to him in great distress. "I am losing my faith," the student said. "Tell me about the faith you are losing," Willimon replied. "I have problems believing the story about the virgin birth of Jesus." Willimon, no doubt tongue in cheek, told him, "Stick with the gospel of Mark for your Bible reading for the rest of the year and maybe a little of Paul's letters." Neither Mark nor Paul deal with Jesus' birth at all. "But," replied the student, "Don't I have to believe in the miraculous birth of Jesus in order to believe in Jesus?" "In one sense, no. Yet in another sense, yes," Willimon said, with tongue still very

much in check. “We ask you to believe in the virginal conception of Jesus and, if we can get you to swallow that without choking, then there’s no telling what else we can get you to believe. Come back next week and we’ll try to convince you that the poor are royalty and the rich are in big trouble. We’ll try to convince you that God rules the world, not the president of the United States. We start you out with something fairly small, like the virgin birth; then we work you up to more outrageous assertions.” Come to worship on a Sunday morning and you will hear stories that tell you that the true measure of your life is not how much you accumulate but how much you give away. That’s what happens when we come to worship week after week, we are transformed, and the outrageous doesn’t seem that way anymore. We are changed.

When Mary came to terms with the message from the Angel Gabriel about the child she would be carrying, she did not sing a lullaby. She sang a revolutionary song. In the Magnificat, she proclaimed, “This child will scatter the proud, bring down the powerful, lift up the lowly, and fill the hungry with good things.” The message she gives is clear. If we let Jesus draw near, He will transform our lives. The critical questions we must ask ourselves are these: Will we dare to follow the Jesus who meets us in these stories? Will we follow Him even when He leads us where we would not venture on our own? Will we dare to risk having our lives transformed by the One we call Savior and Lord? Will we let Him make our lives more than they would be without Him? Will we let Him form us into a community that lives out God’s reconciling, world-changing mission in the world even though it may cost us far more than we bargained for?

Old Testament scholar, Walter Bruggemann was once asked, “Why should we let the Bible shape our lives when it leads us down such risky, costly paths?” He simply said, “Because it’s true! It’s true!”

On this fourth Sunday of Advent, as we wait and prepare ourselves for the birth of the Christ child, for the entrance of God into human history in the person of Jesus, what we need to remember is that Advent is not just about waiting; it is also about announcing that hope is coming, that hope is being born into this broken world of ours. Mary understood this and proclaimed, "Let it be with me according to your word." She was obedient and faithful. She embraced the seemingly impossible, knowing that with God nothing is impossible. She allowed herself to be transformed by God. As we welcome the birth of the Christ child, may we be able to respond as Mary did. May we allow our lives to be transformed by His birth. Amen.