

Mystic Congregational Church, UCC

Mystic, Connecticut

Sermon from December 16, 2007

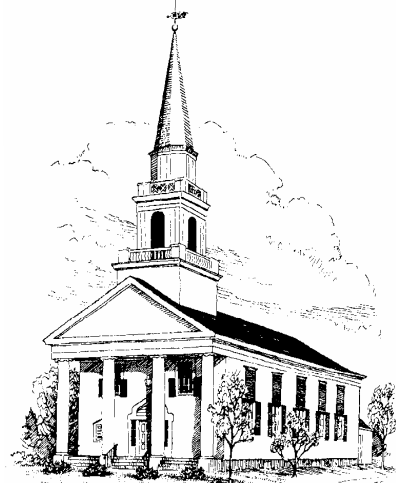
Rev. Barbara J. Libby

“Mary’s Love”

Scriptures:

Isaiah 35:1-10

Luke 1:47-55



Well, we’re getting there! We’re almost to Christmas, but not quite. Today may be getting us closer and closer to Christmas eve and Christmas day but we still aren’t quite there yet. Even today we are only catching a glimpse of pieces of the story. Even today we are still in advent waiting time.

Today we are invited to sit with Mary and ponder what it was like for her before the birth of her first child, before that first Christmas morning. A simple, young, peasant girl, barely a teenager—a child really—a girl who became the mother of Jesus after nine long months of waiting, the woman who stands apart from all women in history—Mary.

With each advent candle each week, we have been invited to consider our faith and to consider hope. On this third Sunday of advent, we light the Candle of Love as we continue to prepare and wait for the arrival again of the light of the world. Today we are invited to sit with the young girl, Mary, whose life was changed forever by the arrival of an angel, changed forever by the arrival of the word of God into her life, changed forever by the news that she would bear a child and not just any ordinary child, rather a child of God and the son of God. The Annunciation gives us a momentary glimpse into that first surprising encounter between the angel Gabriel and Mary. We watch as she tries to process an angelic visitation and hears for the first time that God has chosen her to bear the son of God.

The Magnificat (this prayerful song that comes after this visitation in the text) reveals Mary’s prayerful and profound words after she has had some time to think about this impending arrival growing just below her heart. *The Magnificat* indicates that she had given some real thought to this child on its way. Her song of thanksgiving reveals a powerful “yes” to God’s plan and God’s invitation for her to participate in God’s mighty works.

Mary risked a lot in saying “yes” to God, didn’t she? There were dire social consequences, to be sure—the possible end of a betrothal to Joseph, the shame to her family of a premarital pregnancy, quite possibly even the threat of death by stoning.

I imagine that Mary was immediately struck by some of these threats upon hearing the angel’s announcement in Galilee that day. I’m guessing that Mary didn’t get to “yes” immedi-

ately. Can you imagine what it looked like from Mary's vantage point? Here she was, a very young woman, a nobody really, being asked to bring God to earth in human form!

Would it be possible for any of us not to experience some fear if asked to do such a thing? I always appreciate that the messenger, the angel Gabriel, immediately addresses Mary's fear for fear is our very human response to any unexpected surprise. No one could guess what this child might mean. No one could guess how life would be changed forever by this child. No one could predict how Joseph would react when he heard the news. No one could know what lay in store for Mary or the world. Talk about a surprise package!

Of course there was fear in Mary at the beginning as perhaps there is for most of us in a first pregnancy. Yet we know that Mary did say "yes" to God's amazing and miraculous invitation. We know that Mary did bear a child even before she was formally married to Joseph and even though she was clearly perplexed and mystified about why God might have chosen her.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer suggested that, "We have become so accustomed to the idea of divine love and God's coming at Christmas that we no longer feel the shiver of fear that God's coming should arouse in us. We are indifferent to the message, taking only the pleasant and agreeable out of it and forgetting the serious aspect, that the God of the world draws near to the people of our little earth and lays claim to us." (*Dec. 21, Watch for the Light*) At Christmas, "God of the world draws near to the people of our little earth and lays claim to us." I like that turn of phrase.

Today we look at Mary in her advent waiting time. It's certainly pleasant if we just stick with the party line on the story of Mary—that she was struck with awe and joy when the angel said, "The Lord is with you ... for nothing will be impossible with God." And it's probably not surprising that the story doesn't fill in a lot of the details about Mary, just that she "pondered" a lot of things. Yeah, right! I'd like to have heard some of those ponderings: "You want me to do what, Lord? Are you kidding? Why me? Isn't there someone else who could do this? I'm really busy right now planning my marriage to Joseph."

Luke tells us that Mary says at the close of the Annunciation, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." (Well, I'm guessing there might have been a little more whining involved first. Talk about being surprised and then taking a leap of faith!) I have to believe that Mary had her share of doubts, that Mary had her share of misgivings and, yes, that Mary had more than her share of fear along the way.

I can only imagine that those nine months leading up to that first Christmas were not just elation, excitement, smiles and a few baby showers. Much like the weeks leading up to our Christmas each year, in spite of all the hype of the season and the pressure to be happy, happy, happy, it's not where most of us are even if we try.

I hear stories among us of great pain and tremendous potential for disappointment at this season of the year. There are those for whom this season is the first anniversary (or the 21st anniversary) of the loss of a loved one. There are those who have received word or are fearful of receiving word that they will be without employment in the new year. There are those strug-

gling with serious losses of income or losses of ability to work or disabilities or diagnoses which seriously impact on the future. There are others among us who struggle with life threatening illness, increasing loss of health, and the gradual loss of mobility. There are others among us who are grieving the loss of a relationship or fretting about a relationship that's not working out the way they had hoped.

This is not just a season of love and joy and happiness for all, in spite of all the hype. All the Christmas lights and beautiful decorations notwithstanding, sometimes the lights just make the darkness we feel inside even deeper. This has, for most of us been, a very odd advent. Even before winter has officially arrived we've had a strange mixture of snow and ice and cold. Along with the weather, many of us have experienced the highs and lows of emotions and feelings as this season brings back so many memories.

This is a season of sweetness and light as well as bitterness and darkness. This is a season of sugarplum fairies, nutcracker suites, and Christmas parties, as well as the harsh reality of folks living nearby without enough of the basics of heat, food, or shelter. This is a season of beautiful twinkling lights and favorite ornaments and wonderful decorations, the sound of sweet carols and the smell of Christmas tree and cinnamon and cloves. This is also the season where the fear of unemployment comes all too close to home and the uncertainty about fuel oil and gasoline prices plagues us. This is also the season of threats of terrorism both here and abroad, the daily death counts of suicide bombers and victims of war which continue relentlessly tempered by the news of worldwide efforts on global warming and changes in political situations all around the world. What an odd mixture this advent really is!

Today we try to just sit still and watch Mary for a moment, to catch a glimpse of how things might have been from her perspective. And what do we see? We see a young girl sitting first with the angel Gabriel receiving some amazing news and then we see that same young girl, already moving toward maturity with her cousin Elizabeth and she is singing! She is singing, "My soul magnifies the lord and my spirit rejoices in God my savior!"

Her song is not just for Elizabeth and her husband Zechariah. It is also a song for her own life and for the God who has blessed her and promised her great things to come. *The Magnificat* is a song for the angel Gabriel and for all who will benefit from this birth to come. This song Mary sings is for the proud and powerful, as well as those at the bottom of society, for the hungry and those who have all the riches of the world.

As another preacher puts it, "Her song is for Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, for Sarah, Rebecca, Leah and Rachel. It is a song for every son and daughter of Israel who thought God had forgotten the promise to be with them forever, to love them forever, to give them fresh and endless life." (*Barbara Brown Taylor, p. 17, Home by Another Road*)

Just as God called Mary to be part of God's plan, God is calling this congregation to be part of God's plan as well. Today we ponder God's love for each of us and God's love for this community of faith here in Mystic, Connecticut. This advent, we await and prepare to celebrate a God who works with the agency of ordinary people to bring about dramatic and eternal change. We consider God's surprise to Mary and that invites us to wonder and to consider how God might be preparing to surprise even us and, certainly, this congregation as it moves along

in this interim time between settled pastors. We are invited to ponder what this church might need to say “yes” to in the months and years ahead.

What is god calling this church to do and say and be in the coming new year? How will this church respond to God’s invitation in this new year to come? How will we say “yes” when God calls on us?

Fear can be a very powerful and devastating emotion. It can stop us in our tracks, it can hold us back, it can cause us to resist preparing for change. It’s important to both recognize and name fear and then figure out how to deal with it. We can imagine what it took for Mary to give up her fear as she recognized that God was calling her into a wonderfully strange yet mysterious role.

What will it take for this church to “not be afraid” in the midst of God’s mysterious callings? Let us go forth into these final weeks of advent waiting. Let us prepare our hearts to receive the Prince of Peace again. Like Mary, may we learn how to express our faith, to be obedient and to be faithful servants of God. Amen.