

Behold In Joy

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The Fourth Sunday of Advent
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Psalm 89:20-29; Romans 16:25-27; Luke 1:26-38

“For nothing will be impossible with God.” -- Luke 1:37

With the help of the new Advent banners designed and created by Cynthia Mahoney, we've been exploring the words and ideas of Advent. We began four weeks ago with hope, that most treacherous of emotions. It's treacherous because it won't leave us alone, on the one hand – our Jewish ancestors thank God, in one of their prayers, for making them “captives of hope” -- and, on the other hand, hope is very much bound up with what we want and desire, even when those wants and desires aren't what's best for us.

Hope is just one of those words that's been guiding us through Advent, and now today, with the entrance of our fourth banner, we're surrounded with them: watch and hope, prepare and peace, rejoice and love, behold and joy. These are the words and ideas that guide us through Advent, and Cynthia has taken the words from our earlier banners, our own tradition, combined them with traditional Advent words found widely in the church, and then rendered those words with images in the colors of the windows beneath which the banners hang, as you can see. So much has been brought together by one of our artists-in-residence in canvas and paint and a few simple words and her own skill and devotion.

And just when we are about to be lulled by these words into the warmth and coziness we all associate with Christmas, the angel Gabriel, in this morning's gospel reading, drops a bombshell right in the middle of it all: an unexpected pregnancy. Mary, a teenager heretofore unknown in scripture, who is neither married nor sexually active, is going to have a baby. It's a miracle. It's also a mess.

It's a mess because an unexpected pregnancy, whatever its origin, signals one of those two great interruptions we all get in life, the other, of course, being death. Planned pregnancies we celebrate; oops pregnancies take us into very different territory, and this turn of Advent events brings us, briefly, alongside the hottest question in American society and politics today: what to do in response to an unwanted pregnancy.

Suddenly Advent isn't about cozy words and a growing Nativity scene any longer. Luke has plunged us, with no warning, into one of life's most fraught situations, and if we can sand off some of the layers of pious varnish with which we have shellacked the narrative of the birth of Jesus, we might have some hope of recovering, just briefly, a sense of the raw mess real miracles almost inevitably make of our lives.

Mary, or, as she was probably known during her lifetime, Miryam, was part of a so-called honor culture, in which the sexual behavior of females can secure or destroy a family's honor, and getting pregnant before she was married was the most dishonorable thing a girl could do to her family. The burden was placed on the girl because that's where a pregnancy can always be traced. The biological father can – and often does –

disappear, but the mother is always stuck with the reality of pregnancy, and so if a subsistence society – that is, a society that is just barely able to feed itself – wants to regulate how many mouths it can afford to feed, it will always focus its attention on controlling the sexual behavior of its female members. It's a matter of survival, and women as well as men help to construct this system, which we call patriarchy, and it lasts long after a society has moved away from bare subsistence; it's alive and well today.

So the Holy Spirit has put Mary in a terrible situation, according to Luke, and her pregnancy is more life-threatening for her than pregnancy always is for women. Depending on the decisions of those around her, Mary could be stoned to death, and that possibility had to be one of the first things that sprang into her mind and gripped her heart when she heard Gabriel's words. The scene we are witnessing is perilous, and only centuries of pious glossing has allowed us to read past its harsh reality on our way to the manger. There's nothing happy or cozy about Gabriel's announcement; the Lord may indeed be with Mary – described here as God's "favored one" -- but Mary would be entirely justified in feeling as St. Theresa of Avila is said to have felt when she prayed to God in pain and frustration, "If this is the way you treat your friends, it's no wonder you have so few."

And that's the point – or at least one of the many points – of Luke's including this information about Jesus's birth. Yes, it was a miracle, just as post-menopausal Elizabeth's pregnancy with John the Baptizer was a miracle, but miracles come in different shapes, sizes, effects, and purposes, and this one, for Mary, was one we can be fairly certain she would never have wished on herself.

Miracles are the shorthand word we use to describe God's breaking into our lives in unexpected, unnatural ways. Miracles are simply God's way of getting our attention, of saying, Hey, this is not about business as usual. That's what miracles are for. They're never ends in themselves; they're attention-getters, to be sure, but they always point to a greater reality beyond themselves.

And that reality is always life changing. It's about up-ending your life. It's about anything except business as usual. It's about accepting a call you would never have made to yourself. It's not about what we want or desire. It's not about managing life on our terms, our culture's terms, or even on nature's terms. It's about responding to life on God's terms. That's the message of this encounter between the angel, Gabriel, and the virgin, Mary: responding to life on God's terms.

It's not easy and it's not cozy. Christmas is rushing at us, but Advent still has its claim on us for a few more days. Christmas is now largely the possession of the culture; Advent remains the possession of the church, and Advent is the treasured time when we can probe more deeply into our faith and the reality of life than our frantic, increasingly desperate consumerist culture will allow us to do.

And that frightened teenage peasant girl from Nazareth, known to western history as the Blessed Virgin Mary, helps us do that. She helps us see what a truly faithful life looks like – not a life of detached indifference to the world's suffering, but a profound trust in a purpose that she recognizes is not of her making but includes her, body and soul. We Protestants would do ourselves a favor if we paid a bit more attention to the reasons our Orthodox and Catholic sisters and brothers hold Mary in such high regard.

Do yourselves a favor now, by resisting, as best you can, the pressures of a culture gone mad with greed, and lingering quietly with the stories of Advent, including this lovely and arresting story of a peasant girl who said yes to God's will for her life. Linger a while and let the joy of that story and that truth reassure you and strengthen you and shape you for the life that God is offering you. If there is any magic to be found at Christmas, let that be the magic for you.