



ST BART'S

A Sermon by
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The Gift of Mary

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, December 21, 2014
The Fourth Sunday of Advent—Based on Luke 1:26-38*

He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. I never hear those words without recalling the first time I sang them liturgically. At the First Baptist Church in Houston, MS, we were rather "high church"—for Baptists, which, when all is said and done, is to say we were a touch pretentious. When I was 8 years old, our children's choir processed into the church for the Christmas program, each of us carrying a candle (evidence of our uppity leanings). I remember it as though it were yesterday. Just as we sang, **He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High**, somehow, monkeying around no doubt, I managed to catch my hair on fire, the sticking up part of my crew cut, probably because of the amount of gel in it—think Dippity-do, a dab has never been enough for me. Overall it was a relatively small, though briefly aromatic, moment, quickly taken care of by a very competent director without missing a beat. My mother, ever the unperturbed, said to me afterwards, "Well, darling, everyone looked like an angel, but I was the only mother here with a "flaming angel." And the rest, as they say, is history.

And so today, saving the best of the season to the last, we come to our annual Advent encounter with Mary. It was Mary who was the first to hear this astonishing news of the one who was to come. And as I do every year from this moment in Advent 4 through Christmas Eve, I willingly and quite joyfully enter the myth in all its wonderment, choosing not even to entertain questions of did it really happen or how can this be. These, you see, are the wrong questions, and their answers are unimportant. To ponder them is to miss the drama and the miracle of hope shining so brightly in a dark world—then and now.

Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you, the angel said. Can you imagine hearing such extraordinary words—out of the blue—spoken to you? I can't. The breathtaking surprise and merriment of this season, though, is that these are universal words, not reserved for beloved Mary to hear alone, but words that reflect God's desire for connection with all humankind: Greetings, favored ones! The Lord is with you!" It was and is a broad and wide-reaching claim—this plan of God's. Emmanuel means God with us—not with Mary or us only, not with a chosen few, but with everyone. God with us all!

It is an astonishing tale that continues to turn the world upside down. To set the stage for God's expansive plan, the message came through the life of a most unlikely choice: Mary—a female, desperately poor, unmarried, perhaps as young as 12 or 13, powerless in every way and pregnant—not a messenger anyone would expect to announce the Good News, in fact not a messenger to be seen or heard at all except in disgrace. And, yet, it was she who was chosen to come as the bearer of God. Every detail of the choice signaled an age in which all things now have been made new. The old has passed away and the new has arrived.

It is hard for us to imagine the impact of this story among the hearers of Luke's Gospel. They were a long-suffering community for whom waiting for the Messiah was the context of their lives. Every single day they had longed for a messiah who would liberate them from the crushing power of the Romans. Earlier in our tradition, the prophet Isaiah had spoken similar words of yearning, in this case the promise that the children of Israel would be delivered from the invading Syrians: **Look**, Isaiah wrote, **the young woman** (which the Septuagint translated incorrectly as "virgin") **is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel.** The longing for the Messiah was raw, deeply engrained in the Jewish people and unaccompanied by swelling music.

Understandably, through the passage of the millennia we have spiritualized a notion that for our forebears was quite literal. When as a beaming eight year old, I sang of the one who would be great and called **the Son of the Most High**, I did not hear the words in the way of those who first heard, not hearing them truly as a hymn of

liberation, at least not as my young heart and mind could comprehend. Mary and Jesus by the time of my childhood had become so “churchified,” so adorned, adored and otherworldly as to be nearly unrecognizable, more pageant than promise, raw reality now ensconced in and transformed by beautiful melody.

And here is where it gets complicated for us. Not only can we not forget the context of these words written so long ago; but also their message to us, I have come to realize over the years, is not unlike it was to those who actually heard them. The message is still about liberation. The one who is to come, the one whose Advent we currently await as our Lord—regardless of how we hear that old and complicated word—comes both to deliver us from that which shackles us and to empower us to bring deliverance to those without capacity to deliver themselves, to become purveyors of liberation, of freedom—freedom riders carrying the message of Christ.

Now we begin to see that a story, known for its sentiment and charm, loses neither even as it delivers much more. Despite being created by a male-dominated church hierarchy as an oddly virginal and inaccessible creature in blue, Mary, reared and schooled in the earthy realism of deprivation and prejudice, speaks with rugged determination to us in these words from the gospel of Luke: ***Then Mary said, Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.*** Astonishing! Though not the only faithful response in scripture, this declaration remains one of the most remarkable. It is less reluctant submission than devoted commitment to doing her part in the bringing of God to the world in a new way. The very ordinariness of Mary poses the question to us: how is it that we shall live in view of what has come and is coming among us.

Just three days shy of Christmas, today Mary is a rare combination of humility, vulnerability and humanity. She challenges us from long ago to do two things: to see the one whom she bore not only in a beautiful crèche but in each person we meet and to face the ways we enslave ourselves to desires and things that blind us to the simple message, Emmanuel, God with us. The glitter and glamour of the Christmas we have created is not all bad; it truly isn't. Though often jagged, exhausting, and filled with misdirected excesses, there are in it moments of great love and celebration, moments that I wouldn't miss for the world. But here on this last Sunday of Advent 2014, if we will allow ourselves to honestly behold Mary, to honestly look at the real Mary for just a moment, we will quicken the possibility of actually receiving anew this year, as though for the first time, the coming of the Christ-child. Beholding her invites us to be real with ourselves, to endure the uncomfortable vulnerability such undefended honesty discloses, to face what is unattractive and bitter about ourselves even as we acknowledge that which shines about and within us, and to rise from that encounter empowered to do our part in bringing love, peace, and goodness to this world.

The time is nigh, my brothers and sisters, for again it is almost Christmas.

In the name of God: *Amen.*