



ST BART'S

A Sermon by

The Reverend Canon Stephanie Spellers,
*Canon to the Presiding Bishop for Evangelism, Reconciliation,
and Creation Care; Assisting Priest, St. Bartholomew's*

Pregnant with God

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, December 19, 2021

The Fourth Sunday of Advent

Based on Micha 5:2-5a; Hebrews 10:5-10; Luke 1:39-45, (46-55)

Let us pray:

*O come, O come, Emmanuel
And ransom captive Israel
That mourns in lonely exile here
Until the Son of God appear
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
Shall come to thee, O Israel*

What would it be like, to be pregnant with God?

Mary knew. That's why she is known among the Greek Orthodox as *theotokos*, which means "God bearer." She quite literally carried and then birthed Jesus, Emmanuel, God-with-us, into the world. It's pretty much impossible for us regular humans to imagine: God gestating in us, our fallen human selves birthing God into the world. That may be why so many traditions place Mary on a high pedestal—a throne—above the rest of humanity.

The Catholic Church espouses a doctrine of the Immaculate Conception. They teach that not only did Mary become pregnant with Jesus through the Spirit, but that Mary's mother Anne conceived her without intercourse. Mary's extreme purity made her "blessed" by God, made her womb worthy of a visitation by the Holy Spirit. She was born radically different from the rest of us. That's why God chose her to give birth to the Incarnate One, Jesus ... right?

There's another tradition I want to lean on today: the biblical tradition. That tradition looks at the record of scripture and notes how God constantly chooses the least pure, least significant of all. I'm talking about Moses with his stutter, Rahab the prostitute, Simon Peter with his massive ego and lying ways. God chooses to work in these ordinary folks to birth something shockingly, wonderfully good and holy.

I love this biblical tradition because it lets us see Mary for what she was. Not perfect and sinless. Not immaculately conceived. We can behold her as one of God's prophets and servants, a young Palestinian woman who hesitated a little, asked questions, went to her cousin Elizabeth's house for companionship and reassurance. She was a real woman who had a magnificent calling and stepped up to take part in the redemption and healing of the suffering people of the whole world. A real human like any other who said yes to being the bearer of God.

This lens doesn't just change the way we see Mary. I hope it also changes the way we see ourselves and each other. Because, my friends, God is always moving about, calling and blessing and seeking ways to come to greater

life in and through us. On this 4th Sunday of Advent, days before the dawn breaks at Christmas, Mary isn't the only one pregnant with the life of God. We can be too.

I do not use these words lightly. I have never been pregnant. I have dear friends who have borne children, for whom I serve as godmother. I have dear friends who have quietly, tragically suffered miscarriages. I have dear friends who've invested their time, money and souls into fertility processes, and still never become pregnant. I have transgender female friends who grieve that they have no genetic womb to bear children. So I understand this language of being "pregnant" with God is not simple.

But I truly believe and have seen that this ripening, this capacity to grow the life of God in us and then to bear it into the world, the identity of *theotokos*—God bearer: all of that is available to all of us. All we do is say yes to the calling, and open to God.

There is a beautiful song that a friend introduced me to years ago. Just this week I rediscovered it. The words and images offer another pathway into this reality.

*Grandmothers, I come to you. My heart is full of pain.
I long to tread this broken earth bringing joy again.
This they said to me.
"You must be as a hollow flute and let the wind blow clear through you.
You must be as a springtime branch dancing in the breeze.
You must be as the endless sky, holding sunlight, holding storm.
You must be as a hollow flute and let Creator sing you."*¹

What is Creator trying to sing in you? How in these final days of Advent can you clear just a little more space to become that hollow flute, to receive the life of God? Feel free to sit with those questions. Peer more deeply into your own life. What would you—what would we—look like, sound like, feel like, engage in, if we were hollow flutes, beautiful instruments into which God breathes and through which God blesses the world?

Because it does not matter who you are or where you've been. It does not matter if you are wealthy, comfortable, struggling or impoverished; a cradle Episcopalian or a lapsed Catholic or wounded evangelical who wonders half the time if God exists at all. We do not have to be pure or perfect or pedigreed to bear God. What God needs from us most of all, first of all, is to be open and still, to finally be aware, and to let God plant life in us. Believe God is with us, burning in us, coming to life within us.

This final week of Advent, that will be my practice. I hope to breathe. Make some room. Receive Jesus in scripture, in art, in prayer, in silence. I hope to hold him. Feel him growing and breathing in me. In the midst of such chaos, I hope you will allow yourself to become aware of God's gracious, loving, transforming presence with you, within you ... and around you. As you move about, maybe today at The Peace but also in your regular life, imagine bowing to others and saying to yourself, "Blessed are you and blessed is the fruit God will bear in you."

Because the Lord *is* with us all, ready to bring hope, life and a new song into the world through you. Amen.

©2021 St. Bartholomew's Church in The City of New York.
For information about St. Bart's and its life of faith and mission
write us at central@stbarts.org, call 212-378-0222, or visit stbarts.org
325 Park Avenue at 51st Street, New York, New York 10022

¹ "Hollow Flute" by Laila Brady Walzer, appears in *Songs of Faith and Hope* by Susan Trump.