

A Sermon Preached at St. Christopher's Episcopal Church,
Oak Park, IL on the Fourth Sunday in Advent,
December 18, 2011
By the Holly Ann Burt

God chose to come to into our lives a child born of Mary. Perhaps painlessly – or perhaps through the common pain of labor and the blood of natural birth. I love the paintings and nativity scenes where Mary lies exhausted on the straw, the baby Jesus at her breast.

Christmas was a love story. The love of Mary and Joseph who said yes to a child and to each other. The love of God who said yes and came in the midst of real and human lives.

And so it is today. The love of Christmas is here, now, today. God comes to us in unexpected ways, turning the ordinary and natural to the amazing and extraordinary. Transforming painful experiences into holy events. Rewarding patience with peace.

*My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord,
My spirit rejoices in God my Savior;
For he has looked with favor on his lowly servant.
From this day all generations will call me blessed:
The Almighty has done great things for me, and holy is his Name.*

He has mercy on those who fear and honor and say yes to him in every generation. Look for the presence of God your life this Christmas season.

Amen.

II Samuel 7:1-11,16
Luke 1:46-55

Romans 16:25-27
Luke 1:26-38

Today is the fourth and final Sunday in Advent. And today we celebrate the imminent arrival of the Messiah. Over the past few weeks in this season of Advent, we heard from the prophets of the Old Testament, the Hebrew Scriptures, and we heard from the New Testament prophet, John the Baptizer. For those prophets and for the people who listened to them, the word was: The Messiah is coming. Soon. God will answer and heal and save us. Someday. For Mary and Joseph, that someday had arrived.

When I think of Mary, I'm reminded of a friend of mine, a Methodist pastor who also preached on this fourth Sunday in Advent. For him, and for me, the stories that have sprung up around Mary can be intimidating. This young woman is said to have spent her whole life in prayer and service to God. Her own birth was miraculous. She was a virgin when she conceived and remained a virgin after she gave birth. Her husband Joseph was an old man, dying before they could have children and she never remarried.

The birth of the infant Christ itself was miraculous, a completely painless labor. Mary's Son was the King of Kings, so she becomes the queen mother, the queen of heaven. She is called the mother of God and for some, the co-redemptress with Christ. A very powerful figure. For many around the world, it is this virgin Mary who heard and answered the angel Gabriel. It is this Mary who represents motherhood and to whom they offer adoration and prayers. For those of you who honor this Mary, please forgive me for the next few moments. Because, around the world we find other views of Mary and Joseph.

How many of you have seen Congo Square's, The Nativity, currently at the Goodman Theatre - or the recently revived YouTube video "A Social Network Christmas"? Here Joseph and Mary are a young couple. They are deeply in love, waiting patiently until the betrothal requirements are fulfilled so they can marry, live together and raise children. The Bible does not tell us their ages. True, there is no mention of Joseph after Jesus was born. However, he was a carpenter in a time when there was no penicillin. A rusty nail, a splinter that became infected and lead blood poisoning, a run-in with Roman soldiers. Joseph doesn't have to be an old man to disappear from Mary's life.

Yet in this moment, on this Sunday, a young Mary, looking forward to a life with her beloved Joseph, is suddenly faced with pregnancy. Miraculous or not, this meant months of listening to the whispers and gossip from the community. It meant facing the one she loved with such shocking and hard to grasp news. It meant the possibility of rejection, stoning, death. And Mary said yes.

Only recently have I begun to consider just how amazing that yes might really have been. In working with the genealogy of my family tree, on my sister's husband's side, there are several generations where the children are named after the mother. There is no father in the picture at all. In my line, a number of first-born children bear their mother's name. The father enters the scene only later. I began to wonder if a virgin birth was critical to understanding the Christmas story.

It is not a new question. As early as 150 years after Jesus' death the theologian Origen discusses his conception. The Hebrew word, from which Luke quotes, is the same for young woman and for virgin. In a perfect world, they would be the same. But our world is not perfect as my family tree revealed. Could the child have been conceived in a night of passion between two lovers that went too far? Or worse, as so many, many women have experienced, did Mary have no choice and no protection from a man who took what he wanted, perhaps a Roman soldier?

Yet, Christmas is a love story and Mary ultimately did have a choice. She could bear this child - or not. Whether the infant was conceived through pain or passion or through the pure divine touch, it was indeed Mary's choice. Gabriel came to her, telling Mary her child was the Son of God. I'm not surprised she hurried to her cousin Elizabeth; she needed the support and understanding her newly pregnant relative. She returned home to the one who would be her husband. Mary chose to say yes to God. Yes to the child. Yes to love.

Joseph, too, had a choice. The child was not his, unless there was that night of unexpected passion. His was the line of David, how would this unplanned child affect his family, his heritage, his future? He chose to work through his feelings, perhaps of guilt, betrayal, hurt, pain. He chose to listen to the angel, to say yes to God and yes to the child. He chose to stand by Mary through the dark days of whispering that lay ahead. He said yes to protecting her and her child, as they fled to Egypt and then returned and settled in a different city to give the family a chance to start anew. Joseph said yes to Mary. Yes to love.

God had a choice. God chose to come through an ordinary family, a 99% couple if you will. They may have been of the line of King David, but they did not have the money to find or bribe a place in an inn.

God chose to come in the unexpected. King David himself planned and then expected to build the Temple to the Lord. He was King, the second king of Israel. Jerusalem was now a permanent home, but the tabernacle was still in the nomadic tent. His reasons for wanting to build a temple were probably many, but that's for another sermon. Suffice it to say, God said, "No. You may not build my temple, my house. However, from you, David, your house, your kingdom, your throne, shall be established for forever." The promised child, the promised Messiah would be of the line of David.