

2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16
Psalm 89:1-4,
Romans 16:25-27
Luke 1:26-38

Sermon for Dec 12, 2020

ACCORDING TO YOUR WORD

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Summary: We live by faith, not by sight.

In case you hadn't noticed, there's a flu virus spreading throughout our country and many other countries around the world. It's taking a terrible toll on those countries in lives and capital. Countless small businesses are being destroyed, the education of children is on hold, and politicians of every stripe are savoring the taste of their newly discovered power.

And you look up at the night sky and ask, "How can this be?"

In Albion a couple of weeks ago, a violent fire in one house spread to a couple of neighboring houses and damaged them beyond repair. The people who lived in those neighboring houses stare at the smoldering and sodden remains of their homes, and ask:

How can this be?

My grandparents homesteaded in North Dakota in the early years of the last century. They worked for decades to carve out a little security for themselves out in the brutal conditions of that hard land, only to see all their accomplishment taken away from them by the Great Depression. And they stared over that flat and unforgiving land that had wasted decades of their lives, and asked:

How can this be?

Storms and fires and natural upheavals and wars and greed wreak havoc with countless innocent lives, and those of us who care reach for our Bibles and study it and ask it, please, to answer one question:

How can this be?

And in that whole Bible, there is perhaps nothing that speaks more directly to our confusion than our gospel passage for today. So let's read it together.

Luke 1: 26-38

In preacher parlance, we often speak of Jesus as being, at once, fully God and fully human. And from the pulpit we nod solemnly and smile wisely, as if we were giving voice to a truth that only a select few, the ordained, can understand. But the truth is, no one has any idea what it means to be fully God.

But what each one of us understands is what it is to be fully human, because that's what each one of us is, fully human.

And that's what Mary was when she had the revelation described in today's reading.

In Christian tradition, Mary has been transformed into a lovely, nearly divine image. And that's fine. That's how the human understanding works. The farther we get from historical personages, the harder it is to remember that they were just people, fully human, just like us. George Washington, St. Francis of Assisi, Cleopatra have been elevated in our historical imagination to semi-mythical status: but that's not how they seemed to their brothers and sisters and neighbors.

Paintings and icons of Mary typically show her as a mature young woman, dressed in lovely garments, her hair fashionably arranged and her makeup perfectly applied, as she serenely holds a chubby baby, often with a halo around its little head.

But if we go back to the actual Biblical account, we find a young and confused girl, presented with a mystery beyond her understanding. She was probably thirteen or fourteen years old, probably betrothed to an older man named Joseph. She almost certainly had no other clothes than what

she was wearing, had certainly had a rough and meager diet all her life, had probably never worn shoes and most certainly had never tasted lipstick. Any experience of pregnancy and childbirth she had must have been those characteristic of a peasant village, which very often resulted in the death of the infant or the mother, or both.

And now she is presented in a strange, unworldly way with the news, not only that she is about to be made pregnant, but that it will happen outside of marriage, putting her in a condition that was the most morally degrading a woman could be in among the Jews, worse even than being a prostitute, since according to strict Mosaic law, she could be stoned to death for adultery (Lev. 20: 10). But even if not executed, her own foreseeable life, regardless of how prominent her child might eventually turn out to be, would be the life of an outcast, scorned by both family and neighbors, with no means of support other than to sell her body.

In our passage from Luke, Mary has only two things to say, and it's the first of those two things that, despite all the efforts that have been made down through the ages since to soften and sentimentalize the story, still echoes with poignancy the confusion and dismay she must have felt:

How can this be, since I am a virgin?

It's important to realize that this is not a request for a medical explanation; this is a cry of incredulity, an anguished or perhaps even angry protest against the seeming injustice of it. *How can this be? I haven't done anything to deserve this!*

It's a cry much like those neighbors must have made when the house between them blew up, and their own homes were destroyed: *How can this be? We didn't do anything to deserve this.*

It's the cry that rises to God after every natural catastrophe, when people are killed by drunk drivers, when sudden disease and death strike down children, when war sweeps over the innocent and guilty alike: *How can this be? Where is the justice in this, God?*

We celebrate Christmas with lighted trees and family gatherings and Christmas carols and Christmas cards and perhaps most of all, by giving gifts to each other. And these are all lovely and good traditions, traditions

that adorn our lives with light and color much the same way our plain little trees are adorned during this season.

But it is important to remember the true and greatest gift of the season to all of us, and that is the gift of meaning to our lives.

Without that little Christ child born nine months later to the virgin mother, there would be no answer to our cries of confusion. There would just be the material universe, stretching out forever, and forever indifferent to our lives, to what we do or are. Then Macbeth's words would in fact be true:

*Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow,
Creep in this petty pace from day to day,
To the last syllable of recorded time;
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
The way to dusty death.
Out, out, brief candle!
Life is but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more. It is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury
Signifying nothing. (Act 5; scene 5)*

And the answer to our question, *How can this be?* would always be the same: It doesn't matter. In the end, nothing matters

But the Christ child **was** born nine months later, and that means that our lives do signify, that they in fact have eternal significance.

You notice that in our gospel reading, the Angel never answers Mary's question. He simply expects her to accept it on faith. And that brings us to the second thing Mary has to say:

1:38 Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."

According to your word. And we remember that John begins his gospel with the announcement that God's word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and bore the name of Jesus of Nazareth.

Mary was not given an answer, and so often in our lives, neither are we. But Christianity is not an answer book. It is a personal relationship with a little baby lying in a manger. It is not eyewitness proof, for we live by faith, not by sight. It is not a scientific explanation; it is a promise; it is God's word given to us.

And so our prayer for this Christmas Sunday, heavenly father, is that it be with us, today and always, as it was with Mary, according to your word, for your word is Mary's baby, newborn in a manger two thousand years ago, who grew up to be Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior, in whose name we pray. Amen