

FIRST LESSON: Isaiah 61: 1-4  
SECOND LESSON: Luke 1: 26-55  
December 13, 2020  
THIRD SUNDAY IN ADVENT

***“How Can this Be?”***  
Sermon © Lisa C. Farrell

Once upon a time a pastor was addressing the children during the Christmas service. “Who is the mother of Jesus?” he asked them.

Without hesitation, dozens of tiny voices chorused back “Mary.”

“That’s right,” he said, and who can tell me who is the father of Jesus?”

There was a lot of quiet and fidgeting. No one had warned them there was going to be a quiz, and this seemed to be a trick question. Then a young girl spoke up and boldly announced, “I know! It’s Verg.”

After a few seconds of silence, the entire church erupted in laughter. The little girl was indignant and she pushed on ahead explaining to the thick-headed congregation, “It’s the Verg ‘n Mary, remember?”

Poor Mary did not actually have the Verg on hand to help her out. She was pretty alone when all of this began. Mary’s story is an impossible one, but our familiarity with it steals away its power. We know it so well. We tell the story every Christmas. And eventually, the wonder and the strangeness disappears. But this is a story quite unlike any other. Imagine listening to it as if hearing it for the first time.

We begin with a teenage girl about fifteen years old. Her name, a derivation of the Hebrew name Miriam, would have been pronounced closer to Maria in Aramaic than Mary, probably something like Maryah. In Greek it was Mariam. She was engaged, a normal thing for the time. Her fiancée, Yoseph was probably about ten to fifteen years her senior, old enough to have established himself in the workplace and be able to support a family. There are laws against that kind of union today! But Maryah and Yoseph were a typical Palestinian Jewish couple. Furthermore, the marriage had been arranged, something most Americans also find abhorrent. It’s not as though the couple would not have known each other, however. They were probably first cousins, a preferred arrangement at the time, and also in a tiny village, almost inevitable. My great, great grandparents were first cousins, likely for the same reason. Everyone had enormous families and that’s who you had to choose from.

Maryah and Yoseph were politically and socially insignificant in their world. And it is to Maryah, not even to Yoseph, to whom the angel Gabriel appears! She was poor, she was young and she was female. By the standards of many in her day she would have barely ranked as human. Hers was an anonymous, expendable life. But she was known by someone—someone far more powerful than the senators, governors and civil servants of the Roman Empire. She was known by someone far wiser and holier than the priests and

elders within Israel. Maryah was known by God, and God chose her for a very special purpose.

The angel's words to Maryah as translated in English read somewhat flat to us. They are: "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you." But these words are literally, "**Rejoice!** You who are highly favored! **The Lord is with you.**" *It was a form of a greeting*, but a very prophetic one. In the Old Testament angels who proclaimed "Rejoice, the Lord is with you!" normally did so in the context of military battle. As far as Maryah knew, she was not planning to lead a military campaign any time soon. These were strong words, words that indicated both imminent conflict and the promise of victory. Maryah was troubled when she heard these words, and we can understand why. Anyone who understood the scriptures would be troubled.

The words of the angel Gabriel echo many of the Old Testament prophecies. A child will be born in answer to a great need. There will be unusual circumstances. There will be a special name. Maryah will have a son and name him Jesus, in Greek Yesous, a form of the Hebrew Yehoshua, a name we translate as Joshua. Yosua and Yesua are shortened forms of Yehoshua. Jesus, like his mother, would have grown up with two names in this bilingual culture, Yesua and Yesous. The name is significant. Yehoshua in Hebrew is a cry for help, literally meaning, "Yahweh, help!" **In his person Jesus is the answer to humanity's cry for help.**

Maryah asked a simple question, "How can this be since I have never known a man?" She spoke of sexual relations using the colloquial expressions of her time. The angel answered, not in any terms we would think of as human or sexual. *This conception will be quite different.* "The Holy Spirit will overshadow you," he told Maryah. The holy one to be born will be called the son of God. As a confirmation of this promise Gabriel offered an example of how God was already at work, explaining that Maryah's relative Elisabet, the one who was barren was now with child and in her sixth month. If Maryah needed external verification of the miraculous, she need only go to see Elisabet. With God, said the angel Gabriel, nothing is impossible. And so Maryah said yes, yes to God and yes to the impossible.

Maybe it's good God called such a young woman. An older woman who had seen more of life might have said, "No thank you!" By saying "yes" to God Maryah was putting everything on the line. Strictly speaking, if Yoseph did not back her she could be put to death for adultery because of the pregnancy. Under Roman rule Jews were not permitted to carry out the death penalty. Only the Romans were. But no one would have really cared if an unknown peasant girl in a remote village was stoned to death. And even if her life was spared, if Yoseph did not accept her as his wife and her pregnancy was discovered she would have faced a life of disgrace, rejected and condemned by society. It's tempting for us to believe it was easy for her, because after all, how many of us have personal visitations by angels, but it was not easy. She was only about fifteen years old, and she was being asked by God to take on a *monumental* task. Like any monumental task, however, it came one step at a time one day at a time.

God called Maryah and gave her the job of giving birth to and raising the

son of God, because God knew her heart. Maryah did not know what was ahead, but she trusted that God would sustain her. She could have said, *“No, I’m too young, I’m not smart enough, I don’t have family support, for the rest of my life I’ll have to endure people talking behind my back about how I got pregnant before I was married, no Lord, I can’t, I won’t. Find someone else.”* But she didn’t. Maryah said yes, because God uses the weak and the vulnerable of the world.

So many of us at Penn Wynne have suffered in the past and experience vulnerabilities in the present. We are no strangers to grief and struggle. Sometimes we are tempted to think that our issues disqualify us from serving God. But the exact opposite is true. It is when we know what it is to receive God’s grace and mercy in our own lives that we learn how to extend it to others. Maryah said “yes” and the Savior was conceived within her and born from her. When we say “yes” God’s plans can be conceived in us and carried out through us. In these challenging times God is with us. How can this be? It can be because God sent Jesus and Jesus sent us—to proclaim good news to the poor, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for captives and release from darkness for prisoners. God sent us to proclaim God’s judgment against evil, to comfort those who mourn and take care of those who grieve in our nation. As we emerge in the new year still enduring a deadly pandemic, still facing a racial reckoning of systemic injustice and oppression, and still enduring political strife and turmoil, God can use even us, to be vessels of healing and peace. Like Maryah, we just have to say “yes.” Amen.

Isaiah 61: 1-4

The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me,  
because the Lord has anointed me  
to proclaim good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,  
to proclaim freedom for the captives  
and release from darkness for the prisoners,  
<sup>2</sup> to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor  
and the day of vengeance of our God,  
to comfort all who mourn,  
<sup>3</sup> and provide for those who grieve in Zion—  
to bestow on them a crown of beauty  
instead of ashes,  
the oil of joy  
instead of mourning,  
and a garment of praise  
instead of a spirit of despair.  
They will be called oaks of righteousness,  
a planting of the Lord  
for the display of his splendor.  
<sup>4</sup> They will rebuild the ancient ruins  
and restore the places long devastated;

they will renew the ruined cities  
that have been devastated for generations.

Luke 1: 26-55

<sup>26</sup> In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, <sup>27</sup> to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. <sup>28</sup> The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you."

<sup>29</sup> Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. <sup>30</sup> But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. <sup>31</sup> You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. <sup>32</sup> He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, <sup>33</sup> and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end."

<sup>34</sup> "How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?"

<sup>35</sup> The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. <sup>36</sup> Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. <sup>37</sup> For no word from God will ever fail."

<sup>38</sup> "I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May your word to me be fulfilled." Then the angel left her. <sup>39</sup> At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, <sup>40</sup> where she entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth. <sup>41</sup> When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. <sup>42</sup> In a loud voice she exclaimed: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! <sup>43</sup> But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? <sup>44</sup> As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. <sup>45</sup> Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her!"

<sup>46</sup> And Mary said:

"My soul glorifies the Lord

<sup>47</sup> and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

<sup>48</sup> for he has been mindful  
of the humble state of his servant.

From now on all generations will call me blessed,

<sup>49</sup> for the Mighty One has done great things for me—  
holy is his name.

<sup>50</sup> His mercy extends to those who fear him,  
from generation to generation.

<sup>51</sup> He has performed mighty deeds with his arm;  
he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.

<sup>52</sup> He has brought down rulers from their thrones  
but has lifted up the humble.

<sup>53</sup> He has filled the hungry with good things  
but has sent the rich away empty.

<sup>54</sup> He has helped his servant Israel,

remembering to be merciful  
<sup>55</sup> to Abraham and his descendants forever,  
just as he promised our ancestors.”