

Sermon – “How Can This Be?”

Sunday, December 21, 2014

Scripture Lessons: Luke 1:46-55, Luke 1:26-38

Blythe Denham Kieffer, D. Min.

Westminster Presbyterian Church

Springfield, Illinois

The first scripture reading is Mary’s song of wonder and joy, known as the Magnificat, found in the gospel of Luke 1:46-55. The deep sense of apprehension voiced the First Sunday of Advent has given way to a mood of great joy and expectation this Fourth Sunday. Beyond the astonishment of being the “favored one” who will literally bring God’s son into the world, Mary’s wonder and joy is grounded in the realization that the kingdom of God, which this One brings, is one of justice, equity and peace. Hear now God’s holy word.

46 And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, 47 and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, 48 for God has looked with favor on the lowliness of God's servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; 49 for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is God's name. 50 God's mercy is for those who fear God from generation to generation. 51 God has shown strength with God's arm; God has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. 52 God has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; 53 God has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. 54 God has helped God's servant Israel, in remembrance of God's mercy, 55 according to the promise God made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever." Amen.

Our second scripture, Luke 1:26-38, provides the setting for Mary’s song, which we just read together. Listen now for God’s word to us on this day.

26 In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, 27 to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. 28 And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." 29 But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. 30 The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. 31 And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. 32 He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. 33 He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." 34 Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" 35 The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. 36 And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. 37 For nothing will be impossible with God." 38 Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her.

The title of the sermon: “How Can This Be?”

Text: Mary said to the angel, 'How can this be?' Luke 1:34a

Let us pray. Loving and Holy God, we marvel that you would join us in our humanity through a miraculous birth, becoming one of us in the Christ-child. We ask for courage and wisdom as

we ponder our own life circumstances. And now, may the words of my mouth and the meditations and thoughts of each of our hearts and minds be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

“How can this be?” We can almost feel the disbelief and the fear in Mary’s voice upon hearing the news from Gabriel that she will be expecting a child, not “just a child” but “the son of the Most High.” The logistics make this reality impossible. She is engaged to a man whose name is Joseph and she is a virgin. Mary is also perplexed by the way she is being addressed “O Favored One” and ponders what this sort of greeting might mean. Sometimes good news can be as daunting as bad news. And isn’t it true that most news is a mixture of good and bad. There is no Utopia!

As the story unfolds, Mary comes to understand the honor which is hers and the importance of the work God has called her to do, to give birth to the good news, to Emmanuel, “God with us.” Mary accepts her circumstances and affirms “Let it be with me according to your word.” Mary opens her heart to mystery and to grace. And although some interpret Mary’s reaction as passive, her response can also be understood as one of active quietude and reflection.

We live in a world of knee jerk reactions and quick responses to every situation, twenty-four hour breaking news. Perhaps we can all learn from Mary. When we find ourselves in circumstances that baffle us and we ask the same question Mary asked, “How can this be?” May we have the wisdom to reflect as Mary did, to see our part in creating the circumstance in which we find ourselves and to discern that part which is beyond our control. May we have the courage to contemplate how we will respond and to seek answers in the quiet places within our hearts. And may we never stop wondering how God is working within these circumstances and what relationship they have to the larger picture of God’s work within the world?

Before a minister marries a couple it’s important to spend some time with them to talk about their relationship. Over the years I have had this privilege of visiting with couples on many occasions. One encounter particularly stands out in my mind.

Several years ago a life-long friend, my next door neighbor growing up, and a confirmed bachelor who had vowed many times he would not marry before the age of 40 gave me a call. A few years shy of his 40th year, he announced his engagement and invited me to fly to Laguna Beach, California to officiate and to share the celebration. I knew his fiancée and was delighted for both of them.

A few days before the wedding the three of us sat down to discuss their relationship. This was probably not totally fair to my friend given our long history. It was on this occasion that Bill shared with his fiancée and me why he was able to make the decision to marry. “I didn’t feel like I could get married,” he said, “until I was in total control of my life.”

For a moment there was silence. I caught the eye of Bill’s fiancée who was much perplexed by his words and pondering what they might mean. Then I replied with pastoral discretion, “Bill, I don’t know how to break this to you, but you are *not* in total control.”

We laughed together and suddenly everything felt lighthearted because my friend’s statement is really a wish; a wish that we all share as human beings. A wish, and sometimes an illusion, that does influence and affect how we respond to the circumstances in our lives when we wonder “How can this be?”

Judith Viorst in her book *Imperfect Control* explores how our sense of self and all our important relationships are colored by our struggles over control, over wanting it and taking it, loving it and fearing it, and figuring out when the time has come to surrender it. Judith Viorst encourages us to contemplate, to come to understand the limits and possibilities of our control and to find our own best balance between power and surrender.

Every time we make a choice for something, we choose not to have something else. When a choice is made there are inevitable losses. No one has everything in this life. Certainly, none of us is in total control; not even my friend two days before his wedding.

Life is full of choices. Perhaps what is more important than the choices we make is the importance of the choice we have. Recognizing and celebrating the gift of choice that we experience as human beings and then learning to live graciously with the choices we make and their consequences is the secret of contentment in our life together.

When circumstances are such that it seems we are left without choices, we still have one choice. We always have the choice of how we will respond to our life circumstance. This is what distinguishes us as human beings and this is the most important choice of all.

How can this be? That first Christmas, although difficult, was a joyous and poignant time for Mary and Joseph and one with tender moments. It was a time of surrender, a time of relinquishing control and a time to trust in the God with whom all things are possible. It was a time to embrace their humanity and to celebrate the God who enters into the cold and lonely places in our world to be there with us.

Let us not over romanticize the birth of the Christ child. When we do this, our temptation is to deny Christ's humanity. And then, when our own lives become difficult and unromantic, we forget we have a God who understands our circumstances. We forget we have a God who comforts and upholds us when we feel most alone, vulnerable and out of control.

When we find ourselves asking "how can this be?" in the circumstances of our lives, may we be true to our inner world and may God grant us the serenity to accept the things we cannot change; the courage to change the things we can; and the wisdom to know the difference. By the grace of God goes each one of us. Amen.

Benediction

As we go forth
May the children continue to lead us,
May the joy in their laughter,
The love in their eyes and
The hope in their touch
Bring out the child in each of us.

And may the God who joined us in our humanity in the vulnerability of a newborn baby,
Bless you and keep you.
May God's face shine upon you
and be gracious unto you,
may the light of God's countenance guide you and grant you peace today and always. Amen.