

4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Advent (b)  
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## How Can This Be?

*In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. 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. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" 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. 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. For nothing will be impossible with God." 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. (Luke 1:26-38, NRSV)*

Each Advent season reminds us that Jesus is portrayed in vastly different ways. The Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John all proclaim that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, both divine and human. But this is where many of the commonalities end. In Mark's Gospel, which is our oldest Gospel, there is no birth narrative. Jesus becomes God's son, or more precisely is "adopted" as God's son, when he is baptized by his cousin John in the Jordan River. In John's Gospel, Christ is born not through a womb but through the cosmos—beyond the calculations of space and time. Only in Matthew and Luke do we have the more familiar story of Mary, Joseph and the baby Jesus surrounded by stars, angels, animals, magi and all else that makes Christmas pageants possible.

Many sincere people over the years have asked me, "must I believe in a literal virgin birth to believe that Jesus is the Christ?" For many of us the virgin birth is not the basis of our faith, but an expression of our faith. Ultimately, the gift of the Christ child is a mystery to be honored more than a problem to be solved. But this mystery, however wonderful and heartwarming, does cause the mind to *wonder* in its own analytical way, raising the same question that was asked by Mary: "how

can this be?" Because we humans can't (or won't) allow mysteries to remain unexamined, we invented divinity schools, seminaries and graduate schools of religion to ponder the imponderable ad infinitum. Theologians and biblical scholars become intellectual field guides who outfit us with tools and techniques so that we can chip, pry and exhume the artifacts of our faith into a thousand separate sources of information that, in turn, lead us down a thousand different paths going everywhere and nowhere.

I can tell you from experience that ministers in training should not be allowed to opine around the family table at Christmas. I remember reducing my parents to tears on Christmas Eve when I matter-of-factly declared that Christmas was more feel good than real good, that the virgin birth was an idea borrowed from the Greeks who believed that Plato's mother was made pregnant by Apollo, and that the Christmas season itself was derived, at least in part, from the Roman holiday Saturnalia. My father, a sincere evangelical with unwavering beliefs, told me that I was wasting my money on an expensive theological education since, as far as he was concerned, I could become a certified blasphemer for little to nothing. I came to this family dinner armed to the teeth with all the critical information required to demythologize the Christmas myth. I assumed that this would be as liberating for them as it had been for me, but when I left there was a palpable feeling of horror and disbelief as though I had just conducted a drive-by shooting at a nativity scene.

Sometimes you can have all the facts in the world on your side and still not see the bigger picture. After thirty years of ministry, I have come to appreciate passages of scripture that defy reason and contradict experience. After reading this morning's Gospel lesson several times, I am willing to honor its mystery even when, or especially when, my power to examine, discern or prove has been exhausted. This does not mean that critical questions don't need to be raised. Real faith always wrestles with uncertainty and ambiguity. Any faith that is lived with honesty and openness is like the father of the sick boy in Mark's Gospel who says to Jesus, "*I believe; help my unbelief!*" (9:24)

Mary becomes for us a model who lived her faith in this way. When she is approached by the angel Gabriel who says, "*Greetings favored one! The Lord is with you,*" we are told that she was "perplexed." I like that. Mary knew who she was: she was young and poor in a world that would always keep her at a disadvantage. She was a realist and

became skeptical when God's messenger announced that she was about to become the most highly esteemed woman in the world. It's like the dubious feeling you get when you read one of those crank e-mails announcing that you have been selected to receive tens of thousands of dollars from a Ugandan estate if you will only post back the numbers on your Visa and checking account. It's like the dubious feeling you got in high school when the popular, snotty kids became your best friends for no apparent reason. While Mary might not have been a cynic, her sense of what was possible led her to ask with great curiosity, "how can this be?"

Mary was caught up, just as we are caught up, in an unfolding drama that was bigger than she could imagine. We don't have to live all that long to realize that we are not in control of our destinies. We may not encounter angels, but our lives will be changed by encounters with startling news, both joyful and dreadful. Have you noticed how there is an element of fear when we take in announcements of good news as well as bad news? Really good news that's totally unexpected can and will change our lives, and those around us, forever. Good news, as well as bad news, is disorienting. It will drag us beyond our settled little lives into the great unknown.

For example, students who are awarded a Rhodes or Fulbright scholarship become ecstatic and anxious all at the same time (not to mention their parents, who stand tall with pride as they tremble at the thought of giving their son or daughter over to a much larger world). Or take those who win the lottery. When told the news, they are instantly in a state of shock. But while their material fortune has changed for the better, but they will soon find out how wealth will conspire against them. When long lost relatives and childhood friends show up at their doorstep, they will ask themselves, "how can this be?"

About twenty-four years ago my wife had gone to her doctor for a physical. She felt fine that November day and left his office believing that her blood work would come back from the lab with nothing significant to report. But the lab contacted her doctor within a few hours and told him to bring her back in for another test, since her white blood count was extremely high. She did, and in less than twenty-four hours a bone marrow biopsy had been done and it was confirmed that Elaine had leukemia. What's worse, she was already in a "blast crisis," meaning that the leukemia was acute and we had to act fast. We were told that she had to undergo a bone marrow transplant and the rough odds were

that she had a thirty-percent chance of survival. We were in a complete state of trauma, incapable of absorbing all this information. She asked, I asked, her mother, father, sister and brother asked, "how can this be?" This is the way it often goes with a cancer diagnosis—or other kinds of disorders that grow silently and without giving us a single symptom. The good news is that Elaine survived her bone marrow transplant and has been in a second remission for sixteen years. The odds have always been stacked against her, but she has defied medical statistics to such the extent that researchers in Seattle, year after year, have been saying with great enthusiasm, "how can this be?"

"How can this be?" is a question that joins us to Mary, to Elizabeth, to Sarah and Abraham, to Jeremiah whom God knew before he was even in the womb. It is the question asked by all who encounter angels or demons, to those who hear powerful and unexpected news of any kind. And, like Mary, when the mystery of God comes our way it will be without warning, but it is never without expectation. We can't choose how or when the mystery of God will come to us, but we must choose how we will respond. In spite of her doubts and fears, Mary's affirmation shows us the way: *"Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."* May God grant us all the grace and the gumption to follow in her footsteps. Amen.