

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Michael J. Hoyt
Glenshaw Presbyterian Church
Fourth Sunday of Advent
December 18, 2005

Mary Matters
Luke 1:26-38

I have a love-hate relationship with commercials:
I hate the lies and deceptions,
and would love it very much if we could get the Ads out of Advent.
But I often love the creativity and humor
with which the lies and deception are presented.
My latest favorite is Nationwide Insurance.

A first round NFL draft pick struts glamorously toward a staircase,
to the cheers and applause of the audience,
but at the top he trips on the red carpet,
and tumbles, head over heels,
down the stairs, landing flat on his back at the bottom,
sustaining what must be a career ending injury:
"Life comes at you fast."
To hedge against the unexpected,
get Nationwide on your side.

Or there's the famous rap singer M. C. Hammer
dancing in front of his new mansion one minute,
and the next minute the house is being repossessed,
his limousine is being towed, and his friends have all left:
Life comes at you fast.

Or a scantily clad sunbather,
and sets off a chain reaction of events
that eventually results in a boat crashing through a man's roof
clear across town.
Life comes at you fast.

Luke's story of Gabriel's announcement to Mary
fits easily into this category.

One minute, Mary is a young unknown girl, a virgin,
engaged to a carpenter named Joseph,
preparing for the humble life of a Jewish peasant.

The next minute she suddenly finds that she is going to conceive a child,
before she is married (!), and bear a son

who will be called the Son of the Most High God,
and will inherit the throne of his ancestor David.
From humble Jewish peasant to central actor in salvation history:
Life comes at you fast!

She'll need more than Nationwide on her side to survive *this* turn of events.

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With Gabriel's sudden news, Mary's life becomes the model of the
"Purpose Driven Life."

Many of us wish we knew the purpose of our lives,
but most of us would like it given to us a little more gently
and gradually than this.

We all arrive at a sense of purpose in our lives in different ways.
For some of us, we discover our God-given vocation
only after years of searching, trial and error, and confusion.
Sometimes we can't really discern any purpose in the events of our lives,
and only recognize God's hand at work after the fact,
in retrospect. Hindsight is 20/20.

For others, a sense of purpose gets dropped into our lap,
thrust upon us by no fault or choice of our own.

This seems to be the case with Mary.

But her situation begs the question: "Did she have a choice?"

"Could Mary have opted out of this holy calling
to be the virgin mother of Jesus?

Could she have said 'no, thanks' to God's call
to bear the Christ child into the world?"

It seems unthinkable that God would have forced this vocation onto Mary
without her consent?

This is only one of the sticky theological matters that arise
when we hear the story of Gabriel's announcement to Mary.

Another matter,

separate yet closely related to the question of Mary's consent,
is the matter of the Virgin Birth:

what exactly are we supposed to believe about the Virgin Birth.

We confess it as an article of faith

every time we recite the Apostles' Creed:

"...I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord,

who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary..."

Are we to take this literally?

Does belief in a literal Virgin Birth form the bedrock of our belief
that Jesus is the Son of God?

Is a literal Virgin Birth a fundamental for true Christianity?
Or can we be squeamish about a literal Virgin Birth, as many are,
yet still hold fast to authentic Christian faith?

Actually, this is a very modern kind of question to ask;
it would not have concerned the ancient mind.

When the Gospels were first written,
divine intervention in the conception of great leaders
was not unheard of.

In fact, there are more than a few traditions of supernatural conceptions
of great figures in history, from Plato to Alexander.

This would not necessarily have set Jesus apart as a "one and only"
in the ancient world.

We moderns, however
accustomed as we are to scientific explanations of things,
have trouble with this idea.

But here's the rub:

If you have trouble with mystery that defies natural explanation,
then you have greater problems than just the Virgin Birth.

You've got problems from the very beginning;
as in, "...*the* beginning..."

when God created the world out of nothing.

Even if you don't hold a strict, 7-day creationist view;

Even if you somehow blend creation and evolution,
as many thoughtful Christians do (and I am one of them)
even so,

you have to explain the mere existence of matter and energy at all
and ask where it came from.

Even the most air-tight, scientific explanations
of our cause-and-effect universe,
end up somewhere suspended in the mysterious distance
between human existence and God.

If you have trouble with mystery
you probably have trouble with the resurrection,
which brings to life a man who has been dead three days;
can't really get around mystery on that one!

But beyond science, consider the great moral mysteries of our faith:
it doesn't make much sense that a Holy God of perfect justice

could love a world like ours,
and keep pursuing us with the compassion of a benevolent father
or the faithfulness of a nursing mother.

Or the political and social mystery,
that the ultimate power of heaven and earth
is made perfect in human weakness,
and perfectly enacted by the Son of God dying on a cross.

Now these are mysteries to be grappled with.
Compared to some of these mysteries,
the question of a *literal* Virgin Birth
is a rather small matter.

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Perhaps, though,
the greatest mystery into which we are drawn by this story,
is that of why the eternal God
who brings into existence things that do not exist
who gives life to the dead
would choose to work through the limitations of human lives?

To accomplish the most important work of universal salvation,
to reveal the persistence of divine love,
to unveil the grand purpose of history,
to accomplish all that is set forth by the Eternal Decree
of the Almighty Maker of heaven and earth,
why would God depend on a fragile human being like Mary
to bear a child into treacherous circumstances?

And the next question is even greater:
Why would God continue to depend on fragile,
(forget fragile: already broken!)
human beings like you and me
to continue to bear Christ into the world?

This is *indeed* a mystery: but it is the profound message of Christmas,
that the humble and trusting response of a person like Mary,
weak and insignificant in the eyes of the world,
would become an irreplaceable part of God's
plan of salvation.

God is the author of salvation,
but without Mary's faithful response,

could the story have continued in the same way?
God's grace is the ultimate source of our hope for the world,
but apart from Mary's willingness to go along,
how would that grace have reached us?
For God's plan to work, Mary's response matters,
it matters profoundly.

Mary's question to the angel,
How can this be since I am still a virgin
is usually considered to be more a statement of wonder
and bafflement
than of resistance.

Gabriel says to her,
Nothing will be impossible with God.
Literally, "*No word will be impossible with God.*"
Every word of this announcement will be accomplished.
Every word of God's decree will be fulfilled.
And so Mary says,
*Behold, the servant of the Lord,
according to your word
let it be with me.*

Consider, how patient God must be with the world,
to consistently, and persistently, work through human beings
to accomplish the divine plan.
Elizabeth, a barren woman bears a child
who will prepare the people for the Messiah.
Mary, a virgin, conceives and bears the Savior.
Even the Son of God must first become human,
to give himself to the purposes of God.
Jesus teaches a band of fairly pathetic disciples,
and finally suffers death on the cross.
The women at the tomb, find it empty,
and then become the first witnesses of the resurrection
to a culture that doubts the weak emotional ravings of women.
The early church, a small persecuted minority,
becomes the light by which humanity is drawn
to the gracious work of God.

But how could any of this be,
without the humble willingness of one who says,
*"Here am I, the servant of the Lord,
let it be with me according to your Word"?*

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Do you know that God is calling you to live a life of purpose;
and not just any purpose,
but the ultimate purpose of God's gracious salvation of the world.
God wants to act through your life,
no matter your status in the world,
or what affliction you suffer,
or how rich or poor you are,
despite your physical limitations,
your lack of understanding,
or your doubts.

Your life matters in the unfolding of God's gracious purposes.
Your life is a source of hope and healing for the world.
Your life is part of the plan of salvation.

Nothing will be impossible with God,
not even the impossibility of using you,
broken and imperfect as you are,
to bring blessing to others,
by bearing Christ into the world.

So open your ears to hear the prompting of angels.
Open your eyes to see the unfolding of divine love through your life.
Open your heart to trust the Holy One who comes to us
through the most unlikely people,
in the most unlikely ways,
to accomplish the most unlikely miracles,
if we are willing, like Mary,
to "let it be with us, according to the Word of God."