

Sermon Advent 3B, transferred from Advent 4B Dec. 17, 2023 Fr. Nick Smith

2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16 Mary's Magnificat Luke 1:46-55 Romans 16:25-27 Luke 1:26-38

In the name of God, who makes us, loves us, and keeps us. Amen.

Dear, sweet Mary. Mary the maiden who was chosen to be the God-bearer. Mary who was confronted by the angel-messenger Gabriel with an incredible annunciation. Mary who, the story goes, had always been faithful and had honored God. What was her religious life like, I wonder, before that visit from Gabriel? How did she know God? When she sings the Magnificat canticle, she expresses the gratitude of the Jewish people that they know what it's like to be God's chosen. She sings of the way God has shown the strength of the divine arm to save the people generation after generation, in a litany so familiar in scripture. God has saved the chosen people time and time again; from slavery in Egypt, from homelessness in the desert, from enemies foreign and domestic. In a complicated paradox, God has enabled the people to survive when conventional wisdom would have condemned them to destruction long before. But God has lifted up the lowly and filled the hungry with good things, while scattering the proud and casting down the mighty from their thrones. By the time of Mary, so the Biblical history says, God had rescued the exiled Jews from Babylon, restored the fortunes of Zion, only to have Jerusalem be occupied again, this time by the Roman Empire. Religious life at the time of Mary must have been preoccupied with reminding God of the divine help in ages past, and hoping for more in years to come, trusting somehow in precedent and paradox, in mystery and miracle.

When I was about 10 years old, I spent a couple of weeks during summer vacation with my Uncle Howard, Aunt Betty, and their four sons. Those boys, my cousins, were all a little younger than I, and had ways of behaving which were quite foreign to me. The whole family seemed to spend a lot of time teasing each other, which in my family we never did. They did things like steal your ballcap off your head and then throw it around, daring you to humiliate yourself and try to get it back. Their homelife was always an unpredictable mystery to me, and being there was uncomfortable. They lived in a little village uphill from Seneca Lake, and one day my aunt Betty announced that she had packed some peanut butter sandwiches and a few bottles of Yoo-Hoo and that we were going on a picnic. The plan was to walk down their road to the dead end, then through the woods to a nearby waterfall. Now, at the end of their dirt road was an old abandoned barn; not a large barn like one would have for a herd of cows, but a structure about the size of a family house, except that it was weathered and, frankly, a little spooky looking. As we approached, my cousins yelled out: "Howard ! [they called their parents by their first names], Howard, let's show Nickie the mystery of the old barn!" Hmm, I thought...mystery...old spooky barn...teasing cousins...I don't think so...But just then my uncle picked up a rock and hurled it over the barn roof.

I was puzzled, wondering just what mysterious thing was supposed to happen next. My cousins had their eyes fixed on the roof with great and curious anticipation, and then, mysteriously, the rock came flying back over the roof, and we all scattered to get out of its way! Uncle Howard chuckled with a kind of dark inflection. Then the cousins, the older ones, at least, also gleefully threw stones over the roof, and one by one they came flying back at us. Naturally, they dared me to do the same, so I selected a palm-sized stone from the gravel and threw it with all my might over the roof. Sure enough, a few seconds later it came soaring back, and terrified, I sprang out of its way as it bounced on the ground near my feet.

Some thousand years before Mary's lifetime, King David thought he had God's mysteries all figured out. Our reading today, from the 7th chapter of 2nd Samuel, comes early in the career of David, at a time when he had known nothing except the charmed life of a young, handsome victorious warrior. He has established Jerusalem as his capital, and has brought the Ark of the Covenant there with great

celebration. He has built himself a palace of cedar, and lives a life of luxury and privilege. There are darker days to come, but for a time he is full of himself and his great ideas. He tells his prophet Nathan that he wants to build a permanent home for God, a temple fit for the Almighty benefactor of the Israelites, a place where God's presence can reside in comfort and security surrounded by priestly servants and honorary sacrifice. He assumes that he knows just what God would like. At first, Nathan agrees, but later that evening, God speaks to Nathan and gives him a message for the king; the idea of the temple will have to be postponed. Despite all the great power of God, the Ark, housed in a tent or temporary tabernacle, will do very nicely for now, thank you. Paradoxically, the God of all creation prefers to be among the people, not set apart; leading into battle and judging on-the-spot rather than being detached from the day-to-day experience of humankind. David, in his lofty pride, would not be the one to pin God down. God makes clever use of a Hebrew word which has two meanings here, telling David that instead of a place for God to dwell, a house of God, that God will establish a house for David and his family, a dynasty which will be blessed forever. Jesus will be entitled to this heritage, being from the house, or family of David. But the greater mystery, the greater paradox, almost irony, is that Jesus will also be the house of God, begotten, not made, whose body will become the church, and we its diverse members. Jesus will become that time where divine and human have met and kissed, and that place where the boundaries of heaven and earth become blurred and useless. That time was coming, foretold by prophets, and that place was to be marked indelibly on the treasure map of our salvation. A cross marks the mysterious spot.

Now, reflect for a moment on how you felt having the apparent mystery of the old barn presented to you. Did you feel awe? Disbelief? Curiosity? Wonder? My reason for telling the story was to hopefully give you an experience of mystery. How much more baffled must the early Christians have been when confronted with the paradox of the Incarnation! The barn roof story is more of a puzzle, really, with a logical explanation once we stepped back and looked at the problem from a helpful perspective. Theologians have discussed and argued over the meaning of the Incarnation for centuries, trying to find a perspective which might provide some useful insight, but the coming of Christ, fully human and fully divine remains a mystery. Yet, having heard the words so many times, having recited the creed for so many years, I'm afraid we can become a little desensitized to the wonder and awe of God's great gift. Did the idea of rocks which came back over the roof seem more mysterious to you than Gabriel's assertion to Mary that 'Nothing is impossible with God'? That she would bear a son who would reign as king forever? I find that the words which describe our miraculous faith sometimes glide a little too glibly off my tongue, not giving me time to savor that greatest of all mysteries; that sometimes the story becomes just a little too familiar, and that sometimes it's the familiarity of the story which brings me comfort and joy, rather than the power of the message itself. So I am trying to imagine what it must have been like for those who first heard the news, for those who walked and talked with Jesus, baffled yet overcome by the knowledge that they were walking and talking with God. The powerful paradox that God was entirely present in a companion they could touch, and by whom they could be taught. What a mystery it must have been for them!

As we weave our way through the old, old story this coming year, please join me in trying to recapture that sense of awe. As we read about the Bible characters who encounter Jesus, think of how the story of the Incarnation must have seemed fresh and bold to them, maybe even a little scandalous. It won't ever be our task to solve the mystery, but rather to live it fully, to experience it as they did. And when, like Mary, we are compelled to ask, 'How can this be?!', pray that Gabriel's message will be just as persuasive to our hearts and minds, that we might be 'convinced that, though mysterious, 'nothing is impossible with God.' Amen.