

Advent 4
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From Tom Johnson's examination of Luke's birth story, to the Friday clergy group's look at today's gospel, to a similar conversation in our Education for Ministry group I feel like I've been saturated by this story that begins "In the sixth month, the angel Gabriel....."!

It's a wonderful story with a profound message. It begins with the sort of grand announcement you'd expect from a messenger from God, and continues with the sort of response you'd expect from a 13 year-old girl! Scholars choose that age because the word St. Jerome used to translate the Greek word "Parthenos" was "virgo, hence "virgin". "Parthenos" actually only means "young girl".

So the messenger Gabriel shows up to this 13 year-old and says, of the child she will bear: "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." Pretty heady stuff! Luke might record Gabriel talking to Mary, but really he's talking over Mary's head, at the gathered audience "watching" this scene.

And Mary's response to this amazing declaration? "Pregnant?! I'm pregnant?!!" It's a very human moment in the midst of what is, otherwise, something like a 1st Century news conference designed to establish a particular perspective about the story to follow.

And you can almost hear Mary's next line: "what will I say to my parents?"

There's some humor here, but ultimately this is serious stuff – a young, unmarried, pregnant girl shamed herself AND her family, and pretty much ended any possibility of a valuable marriage – or, really, any marriage. Honor sometimes demanded that the girl be killed by her family (this still happens today).

All of that makes the story as Luke tells it even more striking.

And the challenge doesn't end there. Next week we hear "the rest of the story" – about a dangerous journey at the worst possible time for a pregnant woman, about a peasant birth without even the most rudimentary assistance or healthcare preparations, and – if we were to read on – about a mortal threat that required flight to a place for which Jews held no love: Egypt.

As much as we want this to be a "sugar-coated" story we inevitably have bite into the bitterness just below the surface of the Christmas cake. The truth is, that Mary's in a very tight place.

Luke tells us that this fact doesn't go unnoticed. Despite the rather grandiose language, the messenger's words include two phrases that really leap off the page: "The Lord is with you", and "Do not be afraid." Both phrases address where Mary was when she heard them (upward of 9 months ago if you want to talk "real time"), and where she will find herself next week when we hear again the oh-so-familiar words and the story that goes with them: that "a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered".

I suppose there are several ways to look at the coming of a messenger from God who says "The Lord is with you". It's certainly different than the phrase we use to open the great Thanksgiving Prayer: "The Lord be with you" – that's an invocation of the Holy Spirit, a hope expressed not a reality confirmed. The Messenger says "is" – a present reality. "God is with you right now Mary"

Now maybe I'm just suspicious at heart, but if someone showed up and said to me "I'm here to tell you that God is with you right now" I might say "Why? What have I done?" Or more tellingly, "Why, what's going to happen?" I mention that second question because I think for most of us the presence of God in our lives is not something

that is routinely noticeable – it requires intentionality to see it, and even then it’s often in the rear-view mirror. So we say “what did I do to get noticed?”

I think that’s where Mary was – she was saying to herself “why would a messenger from God come to me?”

And it’s not hard to see that her fears were confirmed by the second phrase: “do not be afraid”. There’s a hanging “because” there, isn’t there? “Do not be afraid because the news I have for you is going to be the most challenging news you’ve ever received.”

Now she knows why the Messenger begins by saying “God is with you”: she’s going to need God with her for the journey that lies ahead.

We know the story of that journey. It goes from great joy to profound sorrow and back to great joy. The Messenger’s words to Mary will be echoed by those of another Messenger outside an empty tomb: “Behold I bring glad tidings of great joy.....”

In the meantime, the Messenger’s words, and the truth that lies behind them, are intended to provide strength for the journey from the cave of birth to the cave of resurrection.

It’s a great story. It’s our story in ways that we don’t always recognize.

There are times in our lives when we’re challenged by our circumstances; when life gets very hard, and we can wonder where meaning can be found, wonder if joy will ever return, wonder God could allow suffering and pain to happen, wonder not just what the future might hold be even wonder if there *is* a future.

God’s message to us, through Gabriel, is the same one delivered to Mary: “I am with you, do not fear.”

“In what way”, you might ask, “is God with me?” The testimony of the great figures of our faith is all of a piece. God is with us through each other. Paul says to the Thessalonian community “I can keep doing what I do, suffering what I suffer, bearing what I bear because of you, because you keep the faith, because you love one another, and in that love you hold me up.” If our faith means anything it is that we are held up by each other, that we bear one another’s burdens as we make the journey together.

You know, there’s a lot of darkness out there. But there’s Light in that darkness – “the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ”, Paul reminded the fractured Corinthian community (2 Cor 4:6).

Ultimately, the darkness cannot overcome that sort of light.....that sort of joy....that sort of peace. That light might not be right here, right now, in our lives, but it will be. The distant horizon glimmers with hope. If we are the vehicle of that Light then it’s up to us to make sure that all will see the glory of that dawning. Amen.