

New St. James Presbyterian Church, London, Ontario
Sunday, December 18, 2016
Rev. Andrew Reid
Isaiah 7:10-16; Psalm 80:1-7,17-19; Matthew 1:18-25
“Anticipating love”

This is another one of those times when the sermon takes the preacher by surprise. Just when I thought I knew what direction it would take, I read two articles, and I found it going off in a completely unexpected direction. Or more accurately, it went off in two very different and completely unexpected directions.

Unexpected direction #1. I thought this was going to be a sermon mainly about Mary, the mother of our Lord. After all, she was the sign that Isaiah spoke of, the sign whom *the Lord himself will give you ... the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel* Isaiah 7:14. So I thought this was going to be a sermon about her faith-filled words and actions, her willing and faithful acceptance of the task that God had for her that the angel announced.

Yes, but. One of my colleagues drew my attention to a blog that Nancy Rockwell wrote last year on the website www.patheos.com. The entry is titled No More Lying About Mary. It's a plea to stop regarding Mary as "meek, mild, and mindless," as Rockwell says she has so often been regarded. I haven't read enough of Rockwell's posts to say definitively that she is a feminist theologian, but this entry does certainly come from a woman's perspective. She writes:

Luke's is the only gospel in which Mary's story appears, and in his account there is nothing submissive nor immature about her. According to Luke, the angel approached her with words of great honour: *Hail Mary, full of grace*. Many artists paint the angel kneeling, in recognition of the honour given to her. The angel is explicit; the honour is for the grace that is distinctly hers. This is a courtship scene. The angel is wooing her, on bended knee,

a suitor – not a constable bringing a decree ...

(Rockwell continues:) Her recitation of the Magnificat (her song that begins My soul doth magnify the Lord) is a political manifesto, delivered fairly publicly, in the home of an official temple priest ... In Mary's manifesto there is evidence of deep thought, strong conviction, and a good deal of political savvy ...

Mary, wanted by God, according to the angel, for her bold, independent, adventuresome spirit, decides to bear a holy child for a bold agenda: to bring the mighty down from their thrones; to scatter the proud in the imagination of their hearts, to fill the hungry with good things and send the rich empty away ...

She is determined, not domestic; free, not foolish; holy, not helpless; strong, not submissive.

Looked at from that perspective, Mary is certainly not the "meek, mild, and mindless" figure that she is sometimes portrayed as.

Unexpected direction #2 involves Joseph, and for this, I am indebted to an article in the Christian Century written by Rev Katie Hines-Shah. I am not going to read it, but I will try to capture the gist of what she says.

Mary is *found to be with child* Matthew 1:18. That meant that Joseph, to whom she was promised in marriage, had some big decisions to wrestle with. He would be perfectly justified under the law if he chose to divorce Mary. Doing so quietly would be the kind way to do it, but no matter how quietly he did it, there would still be consequences. The law said that a woman caught in adultery should be stoned. Even if she avoided that terrible punishment, she would be left without a husband to provide for her. She might well be forced into begging, or maybe even prostitution. On the other hand, if Joseph chose to marry her, he would have to live under the shadow of her apparent faithlessness.

The fact is that Mary's pregnancy put their place in their community, their status in synagogue, and their very families at risk. It had the potential to tear them apart before their relationship had really begun. It was in the

face of all those issues that Joseph chose to make the decision he made, to marry Mary and bring up her child as his own.

But maybe we should not be surprised. Time and again in Scripture we see God working in human families, even in family situations that are far from the ideal of what we would like families to be. So Jacob the cheater became the father of a nation; Rahab the prostitute saved her people; Ruth became a matriarch of a people after her two sons died without heirs. In those cases, God worked with the less than ideal: the unlikely one, the second son, the one who seemed beyond redeeming, the barren woman.

We need to see the events in today's Gospel lesson in that light. More than any other Gospel writer, Matthew views the story of Jesus as the continuation of God's actions in the Old Testament. More than a dozen times, Matthew says in his Gospel that something happened to fulfil the words of a prophet or of Scripture.

And nowhere do we see that more clearly than in the Gospel story of Joseph and Mary. The first of these fulfilment statements is found in Matthew 1:22. Matthew's account of the virgin birth, Joseph's dream, the angel's visit, and the baby's name are all, firmly rooted in the past. He clearly sees them as the fulfilment of something that began long before.

But there is another deeper layer to that link to fulfilment, however. In Matthew 1, we see God helping Joseph, son of Jacob, just as God helped another Joseph, another son of another Jacob, way back in the history of God's people. And in both cases, it was dreams that revealed God's plan of salvation for God's people and for all people.

God's plan of salvation for God's people and for all people is worked out in the lives of Mary and Joseph, in the strength and determination that they both bring to the situation they find themselves in. Not what they were expecting, perhaps. Probably not what they would ever have

thought possible.

But it was the reality in which they found themselves, a reality that overtook them and carried them off and swept them away. A reality that was rooted both deep in the past of their people and their faith tradition, and in the grit of their immediate day to day living. A reality that would bring them great joy and great pain.

Which is also the reality of the Christmas story: it's not just the sweet story of a baby in a manger and shepherds and angels and magi. It's the story of the Saviour of the world coming into the world in human form, what John talks about in his Gospel as the Word becoming flesh and dwelling among us. The technical theological term for that is incarnation.

And the reality for us, in the grit of our immediate day to day living, is in the title that Joseph gave to Mary's baby as the angel instructed him,

²²... *to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:*

²³*'Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,
and they shall name him Emmanuel',*

which means, 'God is with us.' Matthew 1:22-23.