

December 3, 2006
The First Character of Christmas - Mary

Good morning! As I look out into the auditorium, I see our District Superintendent, Cody Collier, and his lovely wife, Sharon, who are here with us this morning. We will ask them to stand. Would you please welcome Sharon and Cody Collier? (Interrupted by applause) Cody, we know you are uncomfortable, due to your recent injury from a fall on the ice, and we are so grateful for the gift of your being here to chair our Charge Conference, which will be held at the close of our worship. Thank you.

(Pause) I felt a need to take a moment to look out and see the Lee's Summit United Methodist Church. We only tend to see it in a portion, at Saturday evening or Sunday morning worship services at 8:15, 9:30, or 11:00. In doing so, we lose sight of the incredible strength and potential of this great congregation. But on these rare occasions when we come together as one and lift our voices in praise of God, something extraordinary happens - the Spirit of God moves in our midst, and we are reminded that we are called to be the One Body of Christ.

The scripture lesson this morning is taken from the Gospel according to Luke, Chapter 1, verses 26-38; the incredible introduction the scripture offers to us of Mary. Hear the Word of the Lord.

“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 very 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?’ And 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.”

Here ends the lesson. Will you pray with me, please? Loving, gracious God, bring us to the point of faith where Mary, blessed mother of our Lord, was able to say, in all things, here I am, the servant of God. We pray this in Christ, Amen.

One Sunday, the week *after* the annual Sunday School Christmas pageant, the Sunday School teacher really didn't have anything in particular planned. (You teachers know what that feels like!) So she came up with a brilliant inspiration and said, "Kids, today we are going to write a letter of thanks to God. I want you to write and tell God what has been happening in your life; tell Him what you are thankful for, what you are excited about. We are going to spend today's class time writing to God." The students were enthusiastic about the endeavor, actually, and they began to put their hearts into the task. One little boy wrote with particular passion - I mean he was fairly scrawling along as he printed his letter to God. He thanked God for the Christmas pageant, saying, "It was *so cool* to be a shepherd! I'm really glad I didn't have to be an angel again. I felt so grown up in my bathrobe walking down the aisle, with my grandma and grandpa smiling and taking pictures. God, it was just amazing! I just wish You could have been there!" (Interrupted by laughter) Do you ever feel that way in life? You send your prayers to God, and can't help wishing in some very tangible sense the He was present - touching your heart, calming your fears, directing your steps, and holding your hand.

The holidays for many families are difficult times; it seems that if there is a dysfunction within the family, it is often exacerbated during the holidays. For other families, there is the pain of "firsts" - the first Thanksgiving, the first Advent, the first Christmas without someone you loved so deeply and dearly, whom you have entrusted to God. And in those times, what should be incredible joy is filled with such poignant pain - for the memories are so fresh, and we find ourselves praying, "I just wish You could be here, God." That is why it seems so appropriate that we begin our season of Advent - the season of hope, preparation, and expectation - with Mary, because in all the scripture, I am not sure I could easily find a more extraordinary character than this young girl from Nazareth.

Think about it - She was about the age of these young women you see before you today (gesturing toward the teenagers on the front row). She was probably 13, 14, 15 -16 years old at most. She was a young girl, and she was betrothed - engaged - to Joseph, whom we assume was an older man, as he disappeared rather quickly from the biblical stories, and we assume that he died. But think of all she endured. First of all, an angel appeared to her to tell her she was going to bear a child. His immediate follow up to that statement was, "Don't be afraid." And yet, she had every reason to be terrified! Pregnancy outside of marriage was a capital offense in that day, in that place. And yet the angel told her the most incredible story - that she was to bear a child who was to be conceived of the Holy Spirit, the very Son of God. It is probably fortunate that he did not go on to tell the rest of the story: that pregnant, she would make the journey all the way to Jerusalem, 65 miles from Nazareth. She probably walked. I know that she is always portrayed on a donkey, but this was a poor family - they offered doves as sacrifice - so they undoubtedly walked. Then after the child was born, she heard of the terror of Herod, and they fled to Egypt - the distant land, a foreign nation. They were illegal immigrants - imagine! And then finally, after she returned, her husband must have died - somewhere after Jesus' 12th

birthday - certainly before Jesus began His ministry, because there is no other mention of Joseph. (He is a character we will explore together next Sunday.) Mary lived to see Jesus begin His earthly ministry, and she was frightened, because she knew the animosity that He triggered. He spoke words that people did not want to hear, and she sensed the anger - they almost stoned Him in his own hometown of Nazareth! She must have watched His career unfold before her with a measure of terror, in the three years of His earthly ministry. She was there in Jerusalem right before the Passover, and she was one of the witnesses to the crucifixion. Can you imagine seeing your own child executed? And yet, Mary had the faith - the audacity - to say, "I am the handmaid of God. I am the servant of the Almighty". And she put her life and her love at the disposal of God. What an extraordinary testimony of faith! There are lessons this young woman, wise beyond her years, can offer to our culture and our generation today, for she was the child - the young woman - whom God chose to bear His only Son. What do we know about Mary?

First, Mary realized that life is difficult. Do you? The cliché is, of course, that God never gives you more than you can handle. Don't you wish God had a little less confidence in you sometimes? Isn't it true? Don't you say that? When you struggle with all that life entails, and how it seems to just come down on you in one way or another, you realize that life is tough, and it is painful. I alluded to some of the ways the holidays can be painful, and I didn't even talk about the cost. Some of you are already looking at your checkbook, wondering how you are going to make it through Christmas with all that needs to be done and all the pressures in terms of our culture, our economy. Life is difficult.

Have you seen Robin Williams' movie, "RV"? It was panned by the reviewers, but is actually a family movie; one of the rare movies you can watch with your children. We watched it as a family the other night - we were just in one of those moods. It was a snow day, thank God! Don't you love snow days? Garrison Keillor talks about snow days and the unexpected blessing of not having to go to school. I still revel in that - it is wonderful! So, we sat one night and watched "RV", with Robin Williams. It is a really amazing story of a family planning a trip to Hawaii which gets canceled because of the father's (Robin Williams) commitment to work. (You know how that feels, don't you?) So instead, they rented an RV, and it was so ridiculous, because on the side of it, in the most garish colors, was a picture of this guy saying, "Rent me". They took it and drove to Colorado. If you have taken your family to Colorado on a vacation, you can relate to some of the circumstances, and it was absolutely delightful, because they faced some horrifying hardships. But here is the amazing thing: in the midst of the sorrow and suffering, they were blessed.

There was a man who lived in the 1700's, called to ministry. He was "of weak constitution", is how they described him; he was constantly sick. In fact, this pastor's illnesses were so pervasive that he often was not able to care for his flock, so he would instead send them letters and notes of encouragement. In his absences, he would pen hymns and songs of praise. He died in 1748, and left behind over 600 classic hymns that we still sing today. His name was Isaac Watts. Here is the question: if he had not faced the hardships, would he ever have offered the blessing? You see, though life is difficult –

and that is the first truth that is evident in the life of Mary - here is the second truth: God is with us in all circumstances. The scripture makes it clear; Jesus is called Emanuel, "God with us", and that is what makes the difference in life.

Some of you who recall your history will remember the stories of when the Nazis invaded Denmark. It was said that the King of Denmark made a pronouncement. You see, the Nazis dictated that all the Jews wear a star - the Star of David - on their clothing, which was to be visible at all times so they were easily identified. It is said that the King of Denmark announced that, as every Dane was equally precious in the eyes of the state, and since Jews would be forced to wear the Star of David, he invited the entire nation to do the same. The story goes that he went to Copenhagen wearing the Star of David as a sign of solidarity with his people. It is a wonderful story, but there is only one problem - it is not true; it never happened. The King of Denmark never demonstrated that faith, courage, or solidarity with his people. But God did: God sent Jesus Christ to be born in a poverty-stricken circumstance, best described as a stable. He came to be one with us, so that wherever we are, whatever the circumstances of our lives, we know that Christ is present.

Most of you recall, or have learned about, the civil rights movement in this country in the 1950s and 60s, and what a painful, arduous time it was for this nation. You may have heard about "the Freedom Riders", who took buses through the Deep South. They would routinely be arrested and thrown in southern jails. The county sheriffs and jailers did everything imaginable to break the spirit of those young Freedom Riders - those ardent defenders of civil rights. They flashed the lights in the middle of the night to deprive them of sleep; they refused to feed them, or if they fed them, would feed them the most inedible gruel imaginable; they would drag the mattresses out of the cells, so that there would be nothing but metal or cement for them to lie upon. The intention was clear - to break their spirits, rob them of hope, and send them away in defeat. And sometimes it worked. But more often than not, what the Freedom Riders discovered in those southern jails is that they were not alone. And you know what they did? They started to sing: they sang hymns and praise, and there was an incredible transformation, which is described in some of the writings that are still around. They described how they sensed Christ's presence, and it so moved their spirits that they would take their own mattresses and push them out through the bars to show that they would not be intimidated by so-called "southern justice". And they stood fast in faith, because God was with them. The extraordinary good news of the gospel that we proclaim today is that God is with you, whatever the circumstance.

If this Christmas season you are troubled by family dysfunction, if this is a difficult holiday because you are struggling because it is a painful first, if you are not sure how you are going to keep it all together in this time of celebration - this is the promise: God is with you, and God is the one who always brings hope and life. For this is the third truth of Mary: goodness, mercy, love, and truth will triumph over hatred and death. Mary witnessed Christ's crucifixion, and it must have absolutely shattered her human heart. But Mary also encountered the risen Christ, and clung to the hope that transforms every

aspect of life. Do you know how that feels in the common every day circumstances of life?

There was a story in the Denver Post several years ago about a church similar to ours, with a heart and compassion for the poor and needy. They were offering Christmas gifts, food, and trees to families experiencing hardship. The pastor asked one young father and his son to go out and cut Christmas trees in a field up in the mountains. So the father and the son set off in their truck to collect Christmas trees - to cut them fresh and bring them back to the church for delivery to needy families. On the way, there was a rock slide that struck the truck, which was totaled. The father was uninjured, and the boy suffered minor bumps and bruises, but was also cut and bleeding. They stood by the side of the road trying to flag some "Good Samaritan" down to give them a lift. They counted as more than 200 cars passed by. Finally, someone pulled over, asked if they could be of assistance, invited them into their car, and delivered them directly to their home. The father and the son got out, went into their house, and realized that they had never asked the names of the people who had so graciously, lovingly stopped to help. Two weeks later, it was almost Christmas, and the church was going to distribute the gifts and food baskets they had collected. The father and his son volunteered to make some of the deliveries. They were driving the mother's car, as the truck had not yet been replaced. As they drove up to the houses on their list, they came to one and went to the door bearing the gifts. It was clearly the home of a family that was struggling - they could tell just by the dilapidated exterior of the house. They knocked, the door was thrown open, and who should it be but the very family that had reached out and helped them in their time of need? They laughed and they hugged, and someone said, "Isn't it amazing how God is present in life?" Don't doubt it - don't ever imagine that you face life alone. When you know that God is with you, the goodness, truth, love, and hope will ultimately triumph because Christ is there right beside you. You see, that empowers you to be courageous and bold, audacious in faith, just like the child Mary, who said, "Behold, I am the servant of God." Amen?

Pray with me, please: Lord God, as we come to Your table, we come to be fed with the love and hope that is ours at Christmas. So prepare our hearts to receive Your extraordinary gift of life. In Christ, Amen.