

"How Can This Be?" 2 Sam. 7:1-11, 16; Luke 1:46-55; Luke 1:26-38
Chapel Lane Presbyterian Church
Rev. David E. Young
Fourth Sunday of Advent, December 21, 2008

The long-awaited day is almost here. We are almost to the event that defines this entire season of Advent. Soon our time of waiting will be over and God's choice will again be revealed to us.

God's choice, as the Bible tells us, is us. "For God so loved the world..." We are the focus of God's attention. The planning and preparations that have gone into our celebration of Christmas are small compared to God's preparations throughout all time and eternity finally to choose to become one of us, Immanuel: God with us.

God rejected the places of power and prestige, the offers that came from people like King David. Instead, God moved into the low rent district and God's angel messenger, Gabriel, announced to a teenager named Mary that she was the one God had chosen to be the mother of Jesus, the Son of God.

A little while before this event, Gabriel had also appeared to a man named Zechariah to let him know that he and his wife would give birth to a son named John the Baptist. Zechariah and Elizabeth remind us of Abraham and Sarah from years before. They too were childless and, like Abraham before him, Zechariah asked the angel how this would be possible since he and his wife were so old.

Whether it was a punishment or whether it was to prove that what the angel had announced would come true, Zechariah was rendered mute, unable to talk, until the birth of the child.

Now, several months later, here is Mary asking the angel: "How can this be?" How could this pregnancy of hers be possible since she was a virgin? The angel doesn't punish her for the question. It doesn't exactly seem fair.

Gabriel's treatment of Zechariah and Mary reminds me of one of my seminary professors, Diogenes Allen. He had a reputation for delighting in taking clergy or seminarians down a few pegs if they dared to ask any questions in class. By contrast, he was equally well-known for being an absolutely gracious and wonderful guest lecturer who fielded the questions of people in the pew with kindness and courtesy.

Was Zechariah treated the way he was because he simply lacked faith and wanted proof? Or was it because he was a trained Levite, working in the Temple, one of the servants of the living God who should have known better than to ask the angel such a question?

By contrast, Mary is treated much more gently. Gabriel explains - if we can call it an explanation - that the Holy Spirit come upon her and the power of the Most High will overshadow her. In short, nothing that we consider impossible will be out of range for God.

At this point Gabriel even tells Mary that Elizabeth, her elderly cousin, is pregnant and is already 5 months along. In response to the angel's announcement Mary simply says: "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."

These are words of faith, words of calm assurance. These are words that tell us volumes about Mary and her willingness to set aside her life in service to God. Because of her response, nothing will ever be the same. What an investment for God to make in the answer of a teenager!

No sooner had the angel departed than Mary departed too. She left Nazareth in the north of Israel and headed down south to the suburbs of Jerusalem where Zechariah and Elizabeth live. Remember: Gabriel had told Mary that Elizabeth was carrying a special child and that she was already 5 months along - far enough along for the pregnancy to be verified by more than the words of an angel, if indeed more evidence was needed.

When Elizabeth heard Mary's voice, the baby within her leaped for joy and that's why Elizabeth greeted her with the divinely inspired knowledge that Mary was pregnant before Mary had even had a chance to share the news herself.

All of this is the build up to Mary's Magnificat, this song that she sings in recognition of the unbelievable good news of God's choice.

Although it is still months before Jesus' birth, Mary sings with the assurance of one who knows that nothing God puts in motion can be stopped and that God's justice, power and love will reign supreme. Now, instead of asking: "How can this be?" She is singing: "Let it be!"

The Magnificat is Mary's song of praise that God has raised up the lowly and put down the proud. In her Magnificat, Mary echoes the prophecy of Isaiah who announced that every valley would be exalted and every hill made low and the rough places would be plain and the crooked become straight and all people would see the salvation of the Lord.

Mary doesn't sing because of the unique position she holds or just because all generations would call her blessed. Rather, it is because she is beginning to understand that nothing would ever be the same

again for all humanity because of what God was choosing to do, through her, in the birth of Jesus.

And she is so sure of God's promised justice and redemption that she is able to sing in the past tense. This is no mere wishful thinking for the future. It has become a reality because God is at work in the world.

That's why she can sing: "He has shown strength with his arm. He has scattered the proud. He has brought down the powerful and lifted up the lowly. He has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel according to his promises."

Mary sings in spite of her doubts and her fears. She trusts her present-tense God for all the future facts she will have to face.

Does she sing because everything has been miraculously transformed? No. She sings like Job, who even in the midst of suffering can sing: "I know that my Redeemer lives."

Mary sings like we sing in "Joy to the World": "He rules the earth with truth and grace and makes the nations prove the glories of his righteousness and wonders of his love."

She sings like we sing, "Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine! Oh what a foretaste of glory divine!"

Mary sings a song of hope and rock-solid assurance that God's will shall be done. And it shall be done because it is being done in her. Just like it is being done in you and in me.

God's will shall be done even in a world that is reeling under financial forecasts and burdens of debt that are still simply too dire to believe. God's will shall be done in a world that is filled with oppression and violence, wracked by war and poverty, crippled by disease, filled with fear and uncertainty, and the shadow of death.

God's will shall be done, because if we believe as Mary did that anything is possible for God, then we too can join with Mary in singing, celebrating here and now what God has done, is doing and will yet accomplish because teenagers like Mary and elders like Elizabeth, righteous men like Joseph and foreigners like the Magi, people like you and people like me, are all responding to the amazing initiatives of the God who acts throughout time and history to put us on the road together toward Jerusalem and the empty tomb.

We take this faith journey together so that when our burdens get too heavy to carry we can carry one another along. We take this journey together so that when one says, "How can this be?" others respond: "This can be and it will be because God wills it and is with us, Immanuel, here and now."

We take this journey together so that when one says, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord" we all can gain courage and strength knowing that, once again, God has made his word ring true in the faith, hope and love that God's people sing into the world and in the work they accomplish to bring about that which God has already intended through the birth of Jesus Christ our Lord.

So may our preparation and our joyful celebration of our faith this Christmas also be our way of answering our own question: "How can this be?" with the answer of faith in our faithful and unfailing God for whom nothing is impossible and who, even at this very moment, is

working his purposes out, purposes that include the faithful discipleship of each and every one of us.

Thanks be to God. Amen.