



Rev Diana Rattray

Mary's song

Romans 16:25-27;

Luke 1: 26-38

Year B Advent 4

24 December 2023

There has been a lot of frenzied activity, shopping and decorating and baking done by many – all to make sure that tomorrow, Christmas Day, will be a perfect day. Yet we know that for many it will not be perfect. There may be family conflict, overexcited children, spoilt food, too much alcohol consumed and for some domestic violence. Why do we strive to make Christmas a perfect day, when the first Christmas was far from perfect?

Today, as well as being Christmas Eve, it is the fourth Sunday of Advent. We have now lit the four candles of Hope, Peace Joy and Love. We do not know what plans and dreams Mary had for her life, but we do know she had not planned to be an unwed teenage mother. In the gospel reading today we hear that Mary was certainly was not expecting a visit from the Angel Gabriel.

But he appeared to her in glowing robes. "Greetings, favoured one. The Lord is with you!" Mary is an unknown teenager, in an insignificant town. "Do not be afraid, Mary. You have found favour with God." How can she not be afraid? Angels don't come to Nazareth and they most certainly don't come to poor peasant girls like Mary. The announcement that she will bear a son and call him Jesus would have been so perplexing. All those questions: How? What? Why? But nothing is impossible with God.

Mary is told that her cousin Elizabeth, like Sarah before her, conceived a son in her old age. Mary would most likely have known the story of Sarah, and it may well have influenced her response.

"Here I am, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."

It is her response to the interaction of the divine with humanity. It is a response that would have repercussions, it would cause confusion and messiness. A threatened ending of her engagement, undoubtedly conflict with her parents and disbelief and gossip by others. As we gather to worship this Christmas Eve. God's call still mystifies us. However God's call still has the power to provoke us to wonder and awe. The news from God is frequently too good to be true and messengers are often unexpected and astonishing, yet the message remains the same: The Divine will always surprise us. Appearing in the imperfect, the messy, the unexpected. The bible is filled with stories of God showing up in the most unlooked-for places and alongside the unlikeliest of people.

Can we see God this year in the rubble piles in Gaza? Can we see God in the life of the father of young children who has just been given a gloomy cancer diagnosis? God will somehow be revealed in the unexpected, the unlooked-for, and the unpredicted. The circumstances of Jesus' birth to an unwed teenage mother, in a backwater town was perhaps God's biggest surprise of all. As we have journeyed through Advent, as we have heard the stories of angels, announcements and camel hair wearing prophets - we once again hear of, and experience, a faith that does not ask us to be perfect, it is a faith that turns everything that was expected upside down. There were no great kings or rulers to welcome the Messiah—instead, the poor, the marginalised, and the outcast attended the birth of God made flesh.

As we continue our journey towards Bethlehem, we celebrate God's favour for the last, the lowest, and the least. As we recognise and remember Mary today we do so with the myths and images that surround the woman and the birth. Meek, mild, holy, virginal. Myths that continue to be used to put down or marginalise vulnerable women. However Mary was not meek. She made the choice to say yes to the Angel. The pregnancy, the circumstances of the birth, the lack of housing and then the unexpected visitors and the fleeing to safety remind us that we are called to revel in God's continued

choice of the unexpected. May we continue to be surprised by who God chooses to deliver the message of hope.

Some are still looking for God in the corridors of power and privilege. In a world where missiles are exchanged between Israel and Hamas, in a world where we hear daily accounts of injustice and violence, where we get news of the illness or deaths of ones we love, we need the message of the angel.

Our world is desperate for Good News. The neglected, forgotten, and the left out are all in need of the message of hope found in Christ, the Son of God and the son of Mary. We long for all children, to be safe in a peaceful world. Where all have the same opportunities.

All of us play a part as bearers of the Good News - that God stands with those who are left out, the lonely, and the lost. Our world is in need of God's mystery and awe and surprise. In our pursuit of the perfect Christmas, the best food, or decorations have we lost some of the mystery so that we are no longer startled by the workings of God? Our lives, our communities, and our world are filled with God's surprise if we stop long enough to recognise it.

When we try and explain or restrict the mysterious we leave little room for God to work in and through us.

When the mystery of God is kept within a formula we have ceased to seek the surprise of God's in-breaking into our world.

And yet, God still finds a way to get our attention and fill us with surprise.

We are all called like Mary to fall into the uncertainty of God.

We are called to let our lives, our hearts, and our eyes be open for glimpses of the divine so that we may follow in the way that Jesus has led.

And like for Mary, when we encounter the divine mystery, we can only respond in joyful song. Each Sunday of Advent, after the sermon, the singers have sung a setting of the Magnificat. As we hear this anthem, sung again, let us be fully mindful of these words attributed to Mary.

'My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour,
for he has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant.
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.
His mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.
He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
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,
in remembrance of his mercy,
according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants for ever.'

As we journey to the manger once more, may we seek to be surprised by a God who finds favour in us, who has lifted up the lowly and filled the hungry with good things. May each one of us be messengers of God who seek the divine in the imperfect and the ordinary.

Amen.