

Adventurous Faith

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Luke 1:39-55

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 Gabriel came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." But she was 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 for ever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" 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.

Christmas is a season for the imagination. We imagine all sorts of things happening at this time of year. We imagine that all the nations of the world will set aside their hatreds for a moment and let there be peace on earth.

At Christmastime we recognize that we cannot celebrate this season by our normal everyday patterns, so we sing hymns that are only sung at this time of the year, or go watch dancing plums and mice in the "Nutcracker," or bring a tree into our home and adorn it with lights. Christmas is the season for the imagination, and that is why Christmas belongs most especially to children for whom imagination, fantasy, and pretending come most easily.

But children are not the only ones who can use their imagination, or else that movie "Miracle on 34th Street" wouldn't delight us all so much, as the mounds of letters to Santa are piled in front of the judge. The enduring quality of that movie proves more than the existence of Santa; it proves that we all need and want to believe in what we can imagine: a world of people caring for one another; a world of honest people who believe the best about each other; a world where the villains are exposed and – dare I say? – fired! And I must mention my personal holiday favorite, "It's A Wonderful Life," where the evil banker Mr. Potter is brought down, and the humble George Bailey is lifted up by all of the people he had helped in his lifetime. Especially in this season we can imagine these kinds of things happening.

So this morning I want to ask you to use your imagination. I ask you to imagine what it was like to be Mary, hearing from the angel Gabriel that she is soon to be Mother of Jesus, even though she is not yet married. Now, I would like you to imagine the moment *after* the angel Gabriel leaves Mary, the moment

after the message has been delivered. That moment is so important for the Christian story. That moment after the angel left Mary – filled with doubt, disbelief, or fear, or all three combined – she hears the promise of the Indwelling Spirit entering into her life, and she is faced with a decision. Do I go? Do I stay? Do I believe? What do I tell Joseph?

Mary had questions; wouldn't you? When the angel first appeared, Mary was greatly troubled and considered in her mind what it meant to be greeted by an angel. Trembling and quaking and pondering are signs that we might be dealing with divine voices. Mary experienced these things in response to the angel's message. This response may be very similar to the process we go through when Spirit speaks to us, whether divine messengers come to us in the form of angels, or in the words of a song, or through our outrage at injustice.

After the angel told Mary what was going to happen, Mary questioned the angel saying, "How can this be?" I find it interesting that Mary's question was, "*How* can this be?" rather than, "It *can't* be." Mary was aware of the reality of her situation, but she was also open to another possibility, something she couldn't imagine or foresee happening. After the angel explained how it was going to happen (with the most unlikely of all explanations), Mary said, "Here I am. I am the servant of the Spirit that hovers over the waters, as you have spoken; so be it." Let it be. Let it be in me and through me.

I think the silence we experience in times of spiritual crisis is there for a reason. All of our old expectations need to be cleared out so we can truly hear something new. When I read this story of Mary, I read it as a story that explains a truth that can't be conveyed any way other than through the symbolic poetry of story. I ask myself what "virginity" – understood as open receptivity – means for me. How can I understand it in a way that helps me bring to life – how the Divine Presence can bring to life – the word, the promise, the moment entrusted to me?

Open receptivity is an energy, just as contemplative prayer is an action. Those moments in our lives when we don't know what to do can become moments of *holy silence* if we listen attentively, making a cup of tea for our fears or anxieties, and setting them off to the side so we can listen to that holy silence, accepting that our anxieties or our old answers are no longer adequate to the task at hand. Then we may find the beginning of an insight, a new vocation, a new calling to serve the ones we love. Most importantly, we may find that we are not alone, but that we are well-loved by something more than we could ask for or imagine when we openly receive the word of an angel, like Mary did. There are times in our lives when we need to create a simple manger scene for our own nativity, for our own rebirth in the spirit. This is true for us as individuals and as communities.

Thomas Merton, the Trappist monk and great writer, and one who made a practice of silent contemplation, put it this way:

For each one of us, there is only one thing necessary: to fulfill our own destiny, to be what the Great Spirit wants us to be. ...[O]ur destiny is the work of two souls, not one. Our destiny is the work the Divine Presence, and the soul within us.

I want to share with you a story of a woman who heard from a divine messenger and responded. This is the story of Shannon Kring, a filmmaker.

I was sitting in a coffee shop in Tegucigalpa, Honduras, the night it hit me: I had to go to Standing Rock to document all sides of the ongoing Dakota Access Pipeline fight. This has happened before: a film choosing me, rather than me choosing it. The first person I contacted was Pearl Daniel-Means, whose Lakota name means “Bright Light.” Pearl has been a Bright Life in my life since 2012, when I had the honor of interviewing her and her husband, the American Indian activist Russell Means, shortly before his death. During the interview, Pearl was visibly grieving, and yet seemed to possess incredible strength. Pearl introduced me to other women in the Standing Rock community who shared with me the wisdom that supports their non-violent resilience.

Mitakuye Oyasin means “all are my relatives” in the Lakota language. More than a phrase, it is a guiding principle for living that extends to all beings, including the land and the water. Our enemies are also our relatives. One afternoon, I witnessed an exchange between an elder and a young cook who had cursed the pipeline executives. “We must be peaceful in action, thought, and word,” the elder chided. “You have lowered your vibration with your words. You dishonored Mother Earth and the bounty that came from her. You lowered the vibration of the opposition. Standing in peace is standing strong.”

I also spoke with a 26-year-old graduate student and activist who told me:

There are prophecies about how our generation is going to revitalize our culture and our people, and carry our people’s struggles on our backs. Not in a hard way, but in a beautiful way, we have a responsibility to keep fighting. This struggle is very real. And if we don’t keep struggling, we’re going to suffer as a human race. Not just as indigenous people. All human beings are going to suffer if we don’t change the way we view the world and the way we have relationships with all life.

I admire the strength of these women, who even in the face of adversity and devastation, care for themselves, their families, their communities, their nations, and the earth on which we all depend. Because of them, I have greater hope for the future. I’m calling this documentary *End of the Line: The Women of Standing Rock*. Theirs is the story that the world must see.

Each day the Divine Presence gives us our daily bread, and each day is a sacrament when we are openly receptive to it, trembling and trusting, as with pregnancy itself. As we continue to move into the increasing light from the candles of hope, peace, joy and love, and move more closely to the Christ candle in the center of it all, may we find ourselves within the holy silence of the manger scene, listening for the voices within ourselves that encourage us to move from trembling to trust, from isolation to service, from scarcity to generosity, until that moment comes when we hear the silent night start to sing.