

Isaiah 11:1-5; Luke 1:30-28

“Here am I, the servant of the Lord”

*Grace to you, and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.*

Tonight, we begin a three-part series titled, “Welcoming Emmanuel: God with us.” The name “Emmanuel” appears in scripture in four places (Isaiah 7:14, 8:8, 8:10, and Mt. 1:23). Matthew 1:23 quotes Isaiah 7:14, “*Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and his name shall be called Emman'u-el*” (which means, *God with us*).” These words in Matthew occur to Joseph in a dream, words that overcame Joseph’s fears about his betrothal to Mary. In Mathew, the name Emmanuel refers to Jesus, who is born to be the sign and presence of God with his people. This is the center of our Advent theme, “Welcoming Emmanuel: God with us.”

Tonight, we meditate upon God with Mary in the Annunciation narrative from Luke. Next week, we will consider Joseph’s story as portrayed in Matthew’s gospel, and in the third week, we will look at John’s narrative of the incarnation in the *Logos*, the Word of God made flesh in Jesus.

As a modern person, it never ceases to amaze me that people still believe at all because the world has changed so dramatically since the time of Mary and Joseph. We live in a world, where it seems that regarding daily life, we place more faith in our reason, science, and progress, than we do in God. Many tend to live with faith in God as a last resort, a stop gap to call on when all else fails. The faith of Mary portrayed in scripture as the mother of our Lord, is the centerpiece in the narrative of Jesus’ birth.

In Luke’s nativity narrative, it’s Mary’s faith that shines as the real miracle. After Gabriel’s announcement to Mary that she would bear a son who would reign over the house of Jacob and that his kingdom would have no end, Mary asked Gabriel, “*How can this be, since I am a virgin?*” Though Mary’s encounter with the angel Gabriel is brief, Mary’s question is also our question: “How can this be?” Like us, Mary seeks answers to questions in her life. The angel tells Mary that the Holy Spirit would be upon her and the power of the Most High would overshadow her. Gabriel says, “*For nothing will be impossible with God.*” Mary’s response is astounding, she says, “*Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.*”

Faced with what seemed impossible, Mary responded with a faith that overcomes the impossible. Though Mary could not see into the future, she nevertheless believed that Emmanuel would be born of her, that she would bear a child who would be called the “Son of

God.” For many modern people it is hard to believe that the Creator God would, through a young unknown girl named Mary, bring to birth the Savior of the world. Yet, it was Mary’s faith, in dialogue with her reason, that held fast to God’s word that she would bear the one called “Emmanuel.”

In the introduction to *Martin Luther’s Christmas Book*, written almost eighty years ago in 1948, Professor of Church History at Yale, Roland Bainton, described the skepticism of modernity:

But what informed person can now believe that the heavens opened and the star appeared? The legends are gone, and with them the faith is also gone...Modern man walks unguided through a bleak world, struggling convulsively until he finds a foothold in some new faith. The Christian story can fill him only with nostalgia for a loveliness irreparably lost.

Bainton, a scholar of Luther and the Reformation, was reflecting on how much has changed since the Reformation and the Enlightenment. In the modern era, the light of reason seems to have overcome the light of faith.

Yet the real miracle of the Christmas story is Mary and her faith. Faith is what lifts us, leads us, and heals us amid the brokenness and death of all that we face as human beings. Through believing in God’s promise, Mary has become “the new creation” that Paul writes of, “*Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!*” (2 Cor. 5:17). Mary’s faith transformed her.

Though Mary was a young girl, her words of faith, “*let it be with me according to your word,*” transformed her into the new creation. Mary was no longer the fearful child, but a child of God who would grow into the woman who stood with faith at her son Jesus’ cross when others had abandoned him. In a world in which many have abandoned faith and religion, Mary’s faith shines as a model for Christians everywhere who also face moments of abandonment and struggle.

Some of you may know Martin Luther’s thoughts on Mary. Luther held a very high view of Mary, writing in his Christmas Sermon of 1531,

*[Mary is the] highest woman and the noblest gem in Christianity after Christ. She is nobility, wisdom, and holiness personified. We can never honor her enough. Still, honor and praise must be given to her in such a way as to injure neither Christ nor the Scriptures.”*

Again, Luther wrote in an essay, titled “*Explanation of the Magnificat,*” in 1521,

*One should honor Mary as she herself wished and as she expressed it in the Magnificat. She praised God for his deeds. How then can we praise her? The true honor of Mary is the honor*

*of God, the praise of God's grace... Mary is nothing for the sake of herself, but for the sake of Christ... Mary does not wish that we come to her, but through her to God.*

To believe in the impossible possibility of “Emmanuel, God with us” is to believe with the faith of Mary. In Mary, faith and reason are integrated, helping us to see that our questions can help lead us into God’s presence. This is what we are supposed to do; we are supposed to bring our doubts, fears and struggles into God’s presence where the Holy Spirit and the power of the Most High overshadows, protects, and recreates us as people of faith.

Tonight, we honor Mary because she reminds us of the power of faith. As Luther suggests, Mary does not wish to be worshipped but that through her, we might see the power of God in her son, Jesus, the Savior of the World.

Mary’s words, “*Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word,*” are meant to become our words. Just as Jesus Christ, the living Word of God, emptied himself by becoming a servant, Mary models for us what it means to empty ourselves in lives of faith and service to Christ.

Just as faith transformed Mary into the new creation, becoming the woman who bore the Son of God. May each of us also become bearers of Christ. May each of us turn ourselves over to God saying, “*Let it be unto me according to your word.*”

This Advent, may Emmanuel, “God with us,” also be with you. Each day, may you become more and more the new creation in Christ.

Like Mary, may you believe the words of the angel, “*For nothing will be impossible with God.*” Amen.