

Fourth Sunday of Advent, December 18, 2005, Liturgical Year "B"

St. Bartholomew's Church in the Town of Tonawanda, N.Y

The Rev. Fr. John E. Commins, Curate

Scripture: Luke 1:26-38

"Mary, Did You Know?"

Do Not Be Afraid:

In the Christmas story from both Matthew and Luke, there are 4 times when people are told specifically not to be afraid. In today's Gospel reading from Luke, you can see that Mary's 1st response to the angel showing up was somewhat subdued. The young teenage girl, Mary, wasn't terrified; instead she seemed to be more questioning of the angel's appearance than scared by it.

The angel shared good news with Mary. He said that she was highly favored and that God had chosen her to be part of His wonderful plans. The angel assured Mary that the Lord was with her. You know what - **this is really very important!** Mary needed to know that the Lord was with her; in fact she needed to know that everything that was going to happen - was part of God's plans. That is precisely why Gabriel told Mary not to be afraid. Mary's life was about to be "*turned upside-down forever*" - and that's never an easy thing to handle.

For the most part, change is hard. We usually welcome positive changes like getting a better job, a new relationship, an improvement of some kind in our lives – change is good. Even then when you make a change, it usually comes with certain difficulties. Getting used to something new takes time. For example: getting married is wonderful, but then you have to give up half the bed, not to mention half of the medicine cabinet. It's a blessing, *a welcome change*, but it's still a change that takes some getting-used-to.

Mary's life changes might cause fear:

Now, let take a look at Mary's changes. She was engaged to a good man, Joseph. They were going to be married. Back in first century Israel, an engagement was practically as binding as a marriage. To end an engagement was the same as getting a divorce, and brought about the same reactions.

So, the angel Gabriel shows up and tells Mary that she was going to have a baby. That would be shocking, if not stunning enough.

Let's pause there for a moment. Girls did get married as teenagers back then, but then you tell her she's pregnant AND unmarried, too. Nowadays, it's scorned, but back then it was disgraceful. Nowadays our society thinks that it's sad. Then it was considered downright sinful – worthy of a stoning.

Mary was entering a whole new world by becoming pregnant. That was a change that she seemed to embrace pretty well, but the angel still told her not to be afraid over it. Mary's plans for her life and for Joseph and the rest of her family were changed forever by the announcement that she would have a baby.

And if that weren't enough; if hearing the news that you were going to have a baby isn't life-changing enough, throw in the fact that it was physically impossible for her. She was a virgin. She knew it, and the angel knew it. She had never been with a man. That's even more of a shock. There's the shock that she was having a baby without being married, but there's the shock of being impossibly pregnant.

Then on top of it all, we must not forget the main point of this story: and that's the shock of being **pregnant with the Son of God**. That's what this is about. This is about how Jesus was coming to

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earth. You see, Mary's plans weren't being changed just for the sake of change, no whim or flight of fancy. Mary's plans were being changed because it was for the greater good of all humanity. Even if the changes were not going to be 100% pleasant, they were certainly good. Mary is certainly an example of the ultimate servant.

How many of you have read C. S. Lewis' "Chronicles of Narnia?" You've probably seen the ads for the new movie "The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe." Or maybe you've been fortunate enough to have seen it already. *The King, the lion Aslan, is returning to the fantasy world of Narnia where it is now always winter. When he returns, he will set the world right.* There's an old saying in Narnia, "***Wrong will be right, when Aslan comes in sight, At the sound of his roar, sorrows will be no more, When he bares his teeth, winter meets its death, And when he shakes his mane, we shall have spring again.***"

But the important question is: is he dangerous? Well, yes. He is dangerous. I mean, have you ever met a tame lion? We are not talking about the Cowardly Lion – Bert Lahr – from the Wizard of Oz. Aslan and that lion are not even in the same League. He most certainly is not safe. **But, he's good. He's not safe, but he's good.**

God's Plans for us:

I think that describes God's plans for us as well. They are not always safe, and they will sometimes lead us into dangerous places. Missionaries go to unsafe places. Many of the early explorers were believers, and they entered unsafe places. Many believers over the years have lost their lives because they were willing to follow their faith in unsafe places, like Communist regimes, radical Muslim countries, or extreme Hindu nations. If we think for one minute that following God's plans will always lead us to green pastures and beside still waters, we are all in for a shock. God's plans are not always safe. But they are good!

God's plans for Mary's life were good. She was favored. The Lord was with her. She had found favor with God. You can almost see the excitement in Mary's voice as she sang her song that we call the Magnificat, found in Luke 1:46-55. **She was excited to be part of God's plans.** She took the angel's words to heart when he said, "Don't be afraid."

Did Mary know all of what God's plan entailed for her and for the Son she would bear? In Luke 2:35 when Simeon said to Mary, "And a sword will pierce your own soul too;" Did she know what lay ahead? Simeon knew that Mary was going to have a rough time in being the mother of the Son of God – the mother of the Messiah.

You see, there were prophecies. There were almost as many prophecies about a suffering Messiah as there was about a kingly Messiah. The people were excited about the Messiah coming to rule, but they didn't piece it together that the Messiah would also go through torment, too.

Psalm 22 shows us so much about Jesus' life. In fact it begins with the words that Jesus cried out from the cross to indicate to the world that the prophesy was being fulfilled before their very eyes: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

Verses 7 and 8 describe the events at the cross: "*All who see me mock at me; they make mouths at me, they shake their heads; 'Commit your cause to the LORD; let him deliver-- let him rescue the one in whom he delights!'*"

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Verses 17 and 18: *“I can count all my bones. They stare and gloat over me; they divide my clothes among themselves, and for my clothing they cast lots.”*

These words give a good picture of Jesus’ suffering. How could Mary know – when she said *“let it be with me according to your word?”*

At this time of year we always tend to think of mostly the Birth of Jesus – as is evidenced in the words taken from the song “Mary, Did You Know” written by Mark Lowry. In it he asks:

Mary did you know, that your baby boy would one day walk on water?
That your baby boy would save our sons and daughters, give sight to the blind man,
would calm a storm with His hand, had walked where angels trod
and when you kissed your little baby; you kissed the face of God?
He would cause the blind to see, the deaf to hear, the dead to live again,
the lame to leap, the dumb to speak praises of the Lamb?

Mary, did you know that your baby boy was Heaven's perfect Lamb?
And this sleeping Child you're holding is the Great I AM.

Let us not forget the price that Jesus paid for us, the pain and the suffering that He endured. We need to remember that the little babe in the manger is the same man who died on the cross.

The Scriptures foretold of the Messiah:

The Scriptures of the Old Testament – that Mary read – foretold the Messiah – but did she know how those words were to affect her life and the life of her Son?

Zechariah 12:10 says these words of God: *“They will look on me, the one they have pierced, and they will mourn for him as one mourns for an only child, and grieve bitterly for him as one grieves for a firstborn son.”* And Zech 13:7 says, *“Strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered.”*

Daniel 9:26, speaking of the Messiah, says, *“The Anointed One will be cut off and will have nothing.”* The word Messiah is the same word in Hebrew for the Greek word Christ, which means Anointed One. Clearly, Daniel saw the rejection of the Christ in his prophecy.

And the **Prophet Isaiah** is chock-full of words concerning the suffering Messiah. 50:6 says, *“I offered my back to those who beat me, my cheeks to those who pulled out my beard; I did not hide my face from mocking and spitting.”*

And Isaiah 53:1-10 is so clearly about Jesus. *“He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering. Like one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all. He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth.”*

You see, this is the sword that Simeon said would pierce Mary’s heart. Her firstborn would suffer this fate, and she would witness it. **Is this safe? Is this pleasant? No, of course not! But is it good? Yes,**

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most definitely. It was good for us that Jesus suffered, because it is through His suffering that we find forgiveness. The angel told Mary not to fear God’s plans for her life. “*Don’t be afraid of how God will do His will in your life,*” Gabriel told her. Perhaps he would say the same thing to us. Don’t be afraid of what God wants to do in your life. **Don’t be afraid of how His plans are changing yours.**

In her book “Let’s Roll: Ordinary People, Extraordinary Courage,” Lisa Beamer, whose husband died as a hero on Sept. 11, 2001, reflects on the loss of her dad. She says, *(and I quote)* “Slowly, I began to understand that the plans God has for us don’t just include “good things”, but the whole array of human events. The “prospering” he talks about in the book of Jeremiah is often the outcome of a bad event. I remember my mom saying that many people look for miracles – things that in their human minds “fix” the situation. Many miracles, however, are not a change to the normal course of human events; they’re found in God’s ability and desire to sustain and nurture people through even the worst situations. Somewhere along the way, I stopped demanding that God fix the problems in my life and started to be thankful for his presence as I endured them.”

How about your plans and fears?

So what in your life’s plans does God seem to be changing? What is not turning out the way you planned or even wanted? What is God leading you to do that you just don’t want to do? What is happening that you don’t know if you have the courage to handle?

May I remind you “**don’t be afraid**”. Things may not turn out the way you expected or wanted, but if you let God be God, things will turn out good. **Maybe not safe; maybe not easy; but good.** His plans for your life are to be prosperous, but that unfortunately doesn’t exclude painful along the way.

And so Brothers and Sisters in Christ - what fear do you need to surrender to Him today?

- Fear of a new job or new home?
- Fear of the future and all that it holds?
- Fear of loneliness, fear of failure?
- What changes are you afraid of?
- A church that is changing from the one you once knew?
- What a new church might look like or where it might be?

We have been given a wonderful example to follow – that of the trusting Mary – who most certainly knew what was ahead – and who her Son was. She knew and had faith that the greatest joy of her life – the Son she would bear and deliver in Bethlehem - would also be the greatest pain in her life – as she watched Him tortured and die on the cross. In spite of knowing all this – through the Scriptures, and the angel’s promise – she still said YES. She knew that in spite of everything – she trusted God – with her life – and the life of her Son, enough to not be afraid – and to submit to His Lordship.

During these last days of Advent, I encourage you to spend some time talking to Almighty God about *each of your fears* in particular, and ask Him for strength and courage to do the right thing anyway. Let us not forget Mary’s word just before the angel departed: “***Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.***” Amen.