**December 20, 2020 – Advent 4 B**

**St. Gabriel Church**

2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16 Canticle 3 (Magnificat) Romans 16:25-27 Luke Isaiah 6:1-4,

***Lord, set a watch before my mouth, and keep the door of my lips. Let my word be seasoned with salt, that it may minister grace to the hearers*** *[Lancelot Andrewes]* ***so that the words that are heard, are Yours O Lord, my rock and my salvation. Amen***

*Intro: Story of Jeff & the Nativity*

It has long been my tradition to begin decorating for Christmas on the weekend after Thanksgiving. When my sons were little, I had a small nativity…carved out of olive wood from the Holy Land. It was placed on a small table so they could see and touch. There was Mary and Joseph with a small crib already for baby Jesus to arrive on Christmas Eve. Keeping vigil were a cow, a donkey and a little lamb. Boys, being boys I often found the pieces rearranged “for different views” and sometimes there were additions: Hans Solo, Luke Skywalker, even Chubakka, occasionally dropped by.

One day I noticed that the cow and donkey were missing. I looked all around but they were not to be found. Craig told me that he had seen his little brother Jeffrey playing with them earlier. When I questioned Jeff, he told me that the animals had grown tired of waiting for Jesus “to be bornded” so they went out to look for him.

Waiting is so difficult – especially when you’re little!

It’s not easy to explain pregnancy to a three year old?

Pregnancy is important! After all, none of us would be here if our mothers had not been *pregnant*! It’s how all humans come into being. Mary’s pregnancy is key to the humanity of Jesus. His birth was the fulfillment of Micha’s prophecy. It is, after all, Incarnation Story.[*a123b*](javascript:void(0);)

In my youth, my family belonged to the Presbyterian Church, thus I was raised Protestant. Like all good Protestants we shared the story of Mary riding the donkey to Bethlehem, giving birth to our Savior Jesus and then … well she was pretty much relegated to stage right --- the far right.

My family’s religious devotions were in stark contrast to my best friend’s Roman Catholic Traditions, where Mary was not only a character within the Nativity, but one who was to be revered and received special devotions. I found that curious but marked it as a difference between the us (Protestants) and them (Catholics).

In 1971, my family was confirmed into the Episcopal Church under the 1928 Prayer Book. A couple years later I married a Roman Catholic, converted and served as a professional lay minister for 30 years. During that time, I continued to hold Mary at arm’s length – an observer to but never fully embracing all the Mary festivities – the May Crownings, the Rosary, various feasts, etc.

Only within the past 25 years and since my return to the Episcopal Church (one which is both Protestant & Catholic) have I begun to take a closer look at this woman who at age 14 was impregnated by the Holy Spirit, gave birth to our Savior, nurtured him, “pushed” him into performing his first miracle [wedding feast of Cana – “woman it is not yet my time”], and remained at the foot of the cross as her only son took his last earthly breath.

Who is this woman called Mary and why was her legacy all but obliterated by the Protestants?

One aspect of the Reformation was a widespread reaction against Mary because some devotions to her had become so exaggerated that followers had placed her as equal to Christ, or sometimes even in his place. The unfortunate tendency of any revolt/reformation is to dump out the baby with the bath water – so to speak. In essence that’s what happened. In an attempt to reject the devotions of Mary, there was a total diminishment of Mary’s life, her impact on Jesus and who she is for us today.

Luke’s Gospel is a Christ-centered proclamation to Christian believers of all times. **AND Luke recognizes Mary, the mother of the Lord, as primarily a believer, one whose love of God casts out all fears. One who has been with Jesus from his conception, to his birth, his infancy, childhood, and manhood.**

Mary, there is no one person who ever had such a close relationship with Jesus in all of the stages of his life and of his ministry.

Our reading today introduces Mary not as a timid teenager of humility and passivity but as a woman of boldness and abundant joy who in 2020 remains for us as she has always been a role model of faith, love, hope, courage, perseverance and great joy.

When Gabrielle told Mary that she was to be impregnated by the Holy Spirit and give birth to God’s Son, Mary’s response came from the deep faith within her willing heart: "I am the Lord's servant. Whatever it costs, wherever it takes me, I will do it."

Her response was one of faith and great courage. She trusted God.

When Gabriel also told Mary that her relative *old, barren* Elizabeth is also pregnant. Mary departs *post haste* off to the hill country to see her. From our readings we can surmise that Mary made with trip *alone.*  Even in those times for a child of 14 to travel such a distance alone was rare and *risky.* Yet off she goes.

We are not told why Mary rushed off to see Elizabeth. Maybe it was to “see for herself” that Elizabeth was really pregnant. Some suppose it was to escape the stares and condemnations of the local gossips. Perhaps it was to commiserate with another about the “unique, untimely” pregnancies.

Whatever the motive, the JOY these two women shared was/is truly shared.

When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the child in her womb (John) *leapt for joy!* And Mary responses to Elizabeth with a song of Joy and Praise of Yahweh. – the Magnificat.

This is not the gentle, tender, dreamy Mary whom we sometimes see in paintings. This is the passionate, surrendered, proud, enthusiastic Mary who speaks out here. This is a woman who stands **fearless** in her love for the Lord!

This song isn’t the sweet, nostalgic, playful Christmas carol. It is a strong song about collapsing thrones and humbled lords of this world. About the power of God and powerlessness of humankind. These are the tones of the women prophets of the Old Testament that now come to life in Mary’s mouth.

This beautiful passage from scripture, in which Mary knows and acknowledges that God has chosen her because He wanted to, not because of anything she did, this passage is often ignored by many in our churches. This passage, in fact all of Luke’s Gospel compels us to take a closer look at this woman named Mary…

Mary is a paradigm of a truly liberated woman. A woman who embraces her own calling…whose love for the Lord casts out all fears! She steps forth with **No fear of God failing her. No fear her faith would fail her. No fear of poverty or loneliness. No fear of not knowing the way. No fear of others. No fear of others’ misunderstandings or rejections. No fear! Her YES was fearless! She was indeed fearless in the Lord!**

Mary went through many trials in her life, and still remained fearless.

She watched her son face persecution at the hands of the very people he came to save. She witnessed the men who swore they would never betray her son, deny him in an instant. It cost her dearly to watch her son carry his own cross until he lost all his physical strength. The nails hammered into his skin, pierced her heart. It must would have been unbearable for her to see him hang on the cross only to experience a slow painful death.

This infant she held in her hands and laid in a manger, now an adult lying dead in her arms.

Yet, even then, she stood fearless in her love of God. She continued as a believer after Jesus death on a cross and is present when Jesus' promise of his Spirit is given at Pentecost. On that windy day Mary’s complete trust, courage and perseverance makes sense of the deep fearless faith she never wavered from.

Mary is indeed a role model for us today because she was always faithful even when things didn’t make sense.

Mary is as important for us today as she was over 2000 years ago. Like Mary, we are invited each day to bring Christ into the world in our prayers, thoughts, and actions. **To stand fearless in our Love** for God trusting in His love for us.

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To step out of our comfort zone, to give birth to new ideas and new ways to faithfully and fearlessly serve the Lord in all things and in all ways.

It was Epiphany before the donkey and cow found their way back to the manger.

And Jeff… well he turned 40 this year and I’m quite certain he now understands how biology works. But more importantly he knows that Jesus had a mom whose love for God cast out all fear; who stood by her son and empowered him to become the man he was and the Christ he remains for all eternity. His mom’s name was Mary ….

Amen