

Reflections for First Church Bethany
Fourth Sunday of Advent, December 18, 2011
Text: Luke 1:26-39
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How Can This Be?

There's one pitfall to our celebration of Christmas; that is, there are quite a few, actually, but there's one in particular that feels worth naming this morning – and that is the familiarity of the Christmas story. Can any of us remember a time when we didn't at least kind of know this story? I grow up in a non-church-going family – but we still had a crèche scene (much like the one here, but slightly larger, and complete with angels winging their way in from on high); my father read the Christmas story from the gospels of Luke and Matthew out loud to us on Christmas Eve; and we sang Christmas carols almost every evening after supper. It's such a familiar story, and we love hearing it again every year – but its very familiarity may keep it from astonishing us as much as it really should.

This morning we hear two of the most beloved parts of the story: the Annunciation and the story of the shepherds. Familiar territory! So my challenge for us all is this: Imagine you are hearing these stories for the first time today. Imagine you have never heard about the shepherds abiding in the fields, watching o'er their flocks by night, when angels come bearing good news of great joy, or about the angel who intrudes with such suddenness on the life of a young peasant girl and changes her life, and the life of the world, forever. Imagine how startled you would be if an angel came up to you – or even if an ordinary human being came up to you – and told you that life was going to be changed – and that because you opened the doors of your heart to the healing wonder of it all, others' lives were going to be changed as well. God's own essence was drawing near, coming into the world through the birth of a tiny baby – and what's more that you were going to have something to do with it, that you were going to play an integral part in this story.

Imagine the scene that we heard about in the passage that Nancy read for us this morning. Imagine Mary's utter astonishment as she blurts out, "How can this be?" Her question is often interpreted as having to do with the virgin birth – and, well, if we had a whole lot more time than we do this morning, we could talk about some of the pitfalls related to that concept – but suffice it to say that, even if the virgin birth is a piece of what she is asking about, there is so much more to her exclamation than a question about the biology of reproduction.

The deeper questions, at least in my imagination, are ones like these: How can this be that God is breaking into my life, upending all the plans that I had? How can it be that God has such extraordinary plans for someone as thoroughly ordinary as me? How can it be that redemption is coming into the world by means of a helpless baby born to an unwed teenager in a rural part of an outlying province on the fringes of the Roman Empire, so far removed from the seat of

power? How can it be that God should become incarnate – should enter into the frailty of human flesh, and that God should stake everything on the notion that love is stronger than death?

“How can this be?” Mary asks when that angelic visitor comes to pay her a call. She is given an answer, at least a preliminary one, having to do with the power of the Holy Spirit – and whether or not she fully comprehends the angel’s answer, she responds with an unqualified yes. “Here I am,” Mary replies, echoing Jeremiah and Samuel and so many other prophets of old who had also said yes to God’s call upon their lives. “Here I am, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to God’s will.” But that doesn’t stop her continuing to wonder, to ponder, to marvel at it all. The next scene in Luke’s gospel places Mary at the home of her much older cousin Elizabeth, whose own pregnancy in her old age is hardly less a miracle than Mary’s is. During the course of that visit Mary bursts into song – the song known as the Magnificat, which some of us will remember from last Sunday’s worship – a song in which she sings of God having looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant, of casting the mighty from their thrones and filling the hungry with good things. And, after the visit of the shepherds – a visit the children will soon tell us more about – she will ponder the words she has heard in her heart.

Perhaps this is as good a remedy as any for avoiding some of the pitfalls of this season, with its stories that almost suffer from too much familiarity, with its sometimes odd mixture of glittery tinsel and unresolved longings, with its complex, often bittersweet tugs on our hearts. Perhaps we, like Mary, are invited to ask questions, to look for God in the most unexpected of places, and to ponder it all in our hearts. Amen.