

PREGNANT WITH POSSIBILITY

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Lead Minister

December 20, 2020

Text: Luke 1:26–38

One of the things I have loved about serving Plymouth Congregational church has been the freedom to engage the scripture text at a deep level. You are a church that is not afraid to grapple with the hard questions. One of best-attended classes that I taught was on the non-canonical texts—the texts that didn't make it into the Bible—and your curiosity was infectious. You are a church of lifelong learners and I love that about you!

As I like to point out, every major person mentioned in the Bible can be explored as an archetype. These archetypal figures are timeless and universal and can speak truth as much today as in Jesus' time. This is what is so compelling about our sacred text—there are always treasures waiting to be found.

This morning, it's Mary, the mother of Jesus, as archetype. Mary is confronted by an angel with a startling invitation, and I thought, "Yes! Haven't we all been in a situation where we were asked to do something that we thought impossible? Or at the very least, where we felt woefully unprepared?"

These humbling moments in our lives are the portals by which the spirit connects with us. In Mary we have the archetype of receptivity, the willingness to be used as God intends. The life of Mary is a reminder that it doesn't matter who you are, what age you are, how experienced (or not) you are. In the realm of divine being, nothing is important except the ability to recognize divinity when it shows up and respond with your whole heart. As Mary said, "Here am I, your servant."

If I were to personalize the story and create a paraphrase, it would read as such: At the end of the year 2017, an angel showed up at Plymouth Congregational Church in Minneapolis, Minnesota, in the United States of America. This angel found me wandering the halls and said, "Hey you, how's it goin'?" And I responded, "You talkin' to me?" "Yes, you!" the angel continued, "Don't be afraid, I just want you to start working as the Acting Senior Minister." I said to the angel, "No, I don't think so. I'm not an eloquent, poetic preacher. And I'm not as funny as Jeff Sartin." The angel said to me, "No worries! I got you covered. You will do some things you thought not possible." After some deliberate and serious thought, I said, "Okay, if you put it that way, I'll give it my best shot." Then the angel departed. And I pondered these things in my heart.

I invite you to put yourself in this story and see what surfaces for you. And you don't have to be a woman. It's an important story for any gender or nonbinary person. To paraphrase the medieval mystic Meister Eckhart, "We are all meant to give birth to God."

Mary was asked to do something she did not fully comprehend. She could not see the future. If she had known that she would see her child arrested, tortured and executed for treason, would she have agreed to the invitation? We don't know. Instead, we know that Mary did agree to trustingly carry and birth Jesus . . . and it changed the world. Mary offers a profound and powerful image of how something new breaks into this world.

Surprisingly, there is no mention of any moral worthiness, achievement or preparedness on Mary's part, only humble trust and surrender. As Seth said last week in his sermon, we don't know how Mary prepared. But Mary gives us all hope that we, too, can birth a new thing. If you have experienced bringing a child into the world or have been up close to the birthing experience, you know we cannot completely control it. Even a planned cesarean delivery can take unexpected turns. Giving birth involves a certain amount of letting go and simply receiving what is given.

As I complete my time at Plymouth, the metaphor that makes sense to me is midwife. I'll admit the gestation period has been longer than I expected. I initially thought it would be like an elephant with its two years' gestation, but instead it's been like a black alpine salamander that has pregnancies that can last three years.

During this three-year gestation period, I have walked with you and gently guided you as you experienced what turned out to be a difficult pregnancy. My task was to help hold things together and keep them running while you searched for the next person to supplement your clergy team. Yes, there have been some unexpected challenges—the controversy over the embroidery, the global pandemic, community unrest and neighborhood violence—but we have remained steady with an eye to the future.

Over the years, I have tried to point you toward a deeper relationship with the divine . . . especially the divine that is within you. I know there are a few you who struggle with what the divine means, but don't get caught up in semantics. No matter what you name the deity you believe in or don't believe, I would claim that we all worship something. My prayer is that what you worship is worthy of you.

Sometimes, we as a church have let our ambiguity about Jesus keep us from a deeper faith life. Mary birthed a person who brought forth a radical message. Where the world teaches “work hard, make money and raise children to be successful,” Jesus teaches a life of service, generosity and an extraordinary degree of forgiveness. Jesus teaches that a simple life is appropriate in the family of God, and those who take more than their share will be lucky if they can find their way into it. The person who has made a lot of mistakes will be forgiven and will be welcomed. Whoever has been acting out sexually and changes their ways will be pardoned and be welcomed. Those who ask will be answered. Anyone who seeks will be found. Anyone who knocks will find an open door.

My prayer for you is that you continue the good work started in you. Deepen your trust with the creator of the universe, who has brought you to this place in this time, the sustainer of all things, the ground of being, the perpetuator of love. Trust in that abundant love.

We don't make great leaps of faith when things are going great. We make them in moments of hardship and tragedy, often through the difficulty of shame when we are being stretched to our limit. Why is that? Because that is when we are most vulnerable, open and malleable. Now is such a time.

The first time I walked into this incredible Sanctuary, I was both impressed and curious that Mary and the Christ Child would hold such a prominent place in your stained-glass windows. For those listening who have never been in our Sanctuary, Mary and the child are right above me, the focal point of our worship. How curious for a Protestant church to have Mary as the central figure! It would indicate that this church places an emphasis on the incarnation . . . the moment when God is embodied in human form.

The stained-glass window is a brilliant reminder of the message of Mary's story: the reminder that over and over, again and again, we open ourselves fully to the spirit by pouring ourselves into life, by saying *Yes!* in the boldest, biggest, possible way . . . and now you are waiting at the delivery room door. . . . You are on the threshold of pregnant possibility.

Before I close, I do want to thank you as a congregation for the privilege to serve you these past 17 years. I'm not sure you can fully understand what it means as a sexual minority to find a job where I can fulfill my call and serve the church, let alone one that I have cherished. Forgive me while I thank a few people.

Thank you to my search committee for thinking this wayward Mennonite should be given a chance. Thank you to past and present church staff; I count it a privilege to work side-by-side with such dedicated and talented people, especially Beth and Seth, my current clergy colleagues, who were willing to embrace working as a team. You are so dear to me! A big thank you to Philip and all our musicians and choirs who make our hearts sing. A heartfelt thanks to our building staff who keep it clean and safe. A special thanks to our sound techs and videographer for sharing our message. A huge thanks to laypeople on boards and committees and all the volunteers of this church who live the true meaning of faith. You are the body of Christ.

I am grateful to the children and youth of this church who taught me so much. A special thanks to my cousin Christine Brandes for sending some music for all of us to enjoy. I am grateful for my daughter Kristin, her husband Drew and their children, Aurora and Azure, for being understanding about all the holidays and birthdays that I missed because I was working. And, finally, to Andrea, my soulmate, for supporting my call to ministry by being a sounding board, a shoulder to cry on and for loving me no matter what I've said or done.

Members of Plymouth Congregational Church, I love who you are and what you are becoming! I am excited about your future. You have called a strong and capable leader to join your clergy team, and I will watch from a distance with loving eyes. You will not be forgotten for I will hold you in my heart.

I will always cherish my time at Plymouth. Because of you have I been able to do what I was called to do and to answer that angel with these words, "Yes, with God's help, I can do this." I hope that you too will hear the angel's invitation and answer the call: "Yes, we can!" May it be so. Amen.