

Isaiah 62: 6-12
Titus 3: 4-7
Luke 2: (1-7) 8-20
Psalm 97

The Reverend Laura Palmer
St. Martin in-the-Fields
December 25th, 2022
Year A

Awestruck at the Manger

On this Christmas morning, may the words of my mouth and the mediation of my heart be acceptable to thee, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer. Amen

It is a joy to be among you this Christmas morning. Joy has come to our world with the birth of our savior, Jesus Christ, and joy has come to my world, because this is my first homily as your interim priest associate. This ministry is a great gift and this morning we begin opening it together.

I'm humbled and thrilled. In Advent, when I can dodge the crush of the season, much of which I love, despite it often feeling too distracting, I ask myself what can I prepare in the manger of my heart for something new to be born?

And it's you-- the beloved people of St. Martin's, as we take our steps into a new future here at the parish we love and call home.

Little did they know, 2,000 years ago, all that was to come. We think of stars, shepherds, angels, and wise men bearing gifts, but the reality is an unmarried teenage girl gave birth in a cold and dirty stable with her fiancé Joseph steadfast by her side, along with donkeys and sheep, matted hay, placenta and blood, and no doubt pungent smells. Forget about epidurals and anything remotely antiseptic, forget about midwives and doulas, was it a long labor, did Mary scream and moan, grit her teeth? We know absolutely nothing until the babe is wrapped in swaddling clothing. Who cut the cord? Cleaned up the mess?

Quite an entry for the Prince of Peace, and Lord of Lords who shall reign for ever, and ever, and ever.

How exhausted Mary must have felt. And Joseph? No Lamaze coach for him.

What in God's name were they doing? Absolutely everything. It is a preposterous story, but so tamed over the millennium, that sometimes we forget how radical it is, both then and now.

Radical for God to stake it all on Mary and Joseph after rolling the dice on Adam and Eve. There were certainly no guarantees. God bet his hope for his creation on us. What if Mary had said no? Her consent was required to what is surely the most preposterous question every asked in human history. The shame of being a pregnant unmarried woman could have gotten her killed.

And Joseph? What in God's name made him stick around? He often gets short shrift in our telling of this miraculous story. Was he so besotted with Mary that he took her at her word? So deeply religious that he believed what came to him in dreams? There was absolutely nothing in this for him. If we find Gabriel a bit of a stretch, imagine what it was like for Joseph who stayed when he had every good reason to bolt.

And yet, and yet. Was it the power of the Holy Spirit that ignited their "Yes" to God preposterous demand? It's what we, or at least, I want to believe, but the mystery is impenetrable. We don't know, we can't know, and that mystery gives me peace. Writes author Madeline L'Engle:

Don't try to explain the Incarnation to me! It is further from being explainable than the furthest star in the furthest galaxy. It is love, God's limitless love enfleshing that love into the form of a human being, Jesus, the Christ, fully human and fully divine.¹

While the church established itself as a patriarchy, it's clear that God did not when God brought the miracle of Christmas into being. It was a Divine Dance—that sublime metaphor by Fr. Richard Rohr from the Center of Action and Contemplation. We're equal partners and it's been that way since the beginning—Mary, Joseph, and the Holy Spirit, brought Jesus into being, and the church only matters if the music and dance plays on in us, in our hearts, and in our lives.

¹ L'Engle, Madeline, Madeleine L'Engle, *Bright Evening Star: Mysteries of the Incarnation* (Wheaton, IL: Harold Shaw Publishers, 1997), 9–11.

I believe that God is always calling us—each and every one of us—to a place beyond imagining which we recognize the moment we arrive.

I never expected to be anything other than a parishioner at St. Martin's when I came through these doors ten years ago for the first time. I never could have believed that this church would believe in me enough to affirm in me a call to the priesthood. But I quietly and simply kept responding to the whisper of God. At times, I really doubted it was possible but something in me kept saying "Yes" which is why Mary is so close to my heart.

Can I be as bold as she? Can I trust? Can I dare? Can I not only pay attention—but follow-- the things that come unbidden? In dreams, in intuitions?

When I came here this past summer for August and part of September, something happened. While I had every intention of returning to St. Peter's Glenside where I was serving, I also felt a sense of belonging here that I'd never felt before. I'd never felt more affirmed as a priest, and I wasn't quite sure what to do with that feeling, nor did I have to. I was, I realize now, in the midst of changing partners in the Divine Dance.

How lucky we are to share this intimacy of Christmas morning with each other on this frigid Sunday morning. In this tender and quiet morning, there is space to feel that peace that passes all understanding. The trumpets have sounded and the Hallelujahs have been sung and we get left awestruck at the manger, fully alive in love, hope and joy, that the babe in swaddling clothing lying in a manger brought into this world.

God risked everything on us. Can each of us do something to risk everything for God in this new year? Create a manger in your heart. Imagine new life being born there that you will nurture and tend as God's beloved. Follow that bright star in your sky. See yourself as part of the Divine Dance because you are. You count, You matter and You belong and you are loved, because you are part of St. Martin in-the-Fields.

Let joy fill the manger in your heart. This Advent I realized that Mary sang the Magnificat on the doorsteps of her cousin Elizabeth whom she ran to immediately after the Annunciation. Whatever fear was in her heart, whatever doubt was in

her head, was pushed aside by her joy as she exclaimed, “My soul magnifies the Lord, and the spirit rejoices in God my Savior.” Writes theologian Debie Thomas:

Against all odds, Mary dares to believe that what is happening to her is not horror, not tragedy, not random, not meaningless. She doesn’t succumb to the blistering narratives swirling around her — narratives of shame, scandal, and sinfulness. Instead, she insists that her very body is infused with the presence and power of a God who acts decisively and generously in history. In her history. In her life.²

And in all our lives. Like Mary, you have everything you need, you are chosen by God, as God’s beloved. Now give birth to something new. AMEN

² Thomas, Debie, *Journey with Jesus, A Weekly Webzine*, December 13th, 2020