

Sermon on Luke 1:26 ff
Blacksburg Presbyterian Church
Susan Verbrugge
December 21, 2008

Just when I think I know myself, something surprises me about me. For instance, I am not a fan of the color pink, at least not on me. I was such a tomboy growing up, still am I suppose, and I thought pink was just too girly. When my daughter Kinsey was born, I had to tell my mother-in-law to back off with the cutesy pink clothes. And she wasn't to buy any of those bows to go around the baby's bald head to show everyone that she was a girl...especially if those bows were pink. But, I was in a store the other day looking for a sweater for myself. And guess what, I kept coming back to the table that had this beautiful pink sweater. "No way! It's pink," I kept intoning in my head. And, I would wander off. But, back I would come again. "Fine...I'll try it on. But I sure hope no one I know sees me doing this," I said to myself. I pulled it over my head in the dressing room and lo and behold, I loved it. The color really looked good on me. But pink? Just when I had finally convinced myself to buy it, I looked at the price tag. Yikes. Pink sure is expensive. So, with a bit of regret, the sweater went back on the table, and I left the store with my reputation as a grown-up tomboy intact. Little did I know that another surprise about myself was waiting just around the corner.

You see, I have found that I may have a bit of Catholicity buried in my very Protestant self. Almost as shocking as pink to me. For you see, Mary has really caught my attention this year. I have gained a deep admiration and respect for her. I have begun to think about the statues that I've seen of Mary with her arms outstretched, palms held out to the world, in a very different way. I have seen with new eyes her beautiful face in artwork staring down at the baby Jesus. I think I can begin to understand why our Catholic brothers and sisters hold her in such high esteem.

Here is a very young woman, maybe as young as twelve, but certainly in that day not more than sixteen. She is following along in the custom, just as a good Jewish girl of her time is

supposed to do. She is probably already scared enough as she thinks of leaving the life she has always known to head into a new family in a totally new role with someone she barely knows.

And then, this being shows up in her front yard and greets her. It's amazing that in the first moment of seeing this image before her, she didn't run back in the house, slamming the door behind her. There is a legend that says Mary wasn't the first woman that this angel approached. Maybe the other women had run screaming into the night or had refused to be a part of this crazy plan.

Mary, however, sticks around to see what this being has to say to her. What she hears is not news meant for the ears of a young girl. This is news better shared with a priest or at least one of those prophet guys, but a young woman? A woman, in that culture?

After she hears this incredible, ridiculous news, she asks a few questions, many less than I think I would have asked, and she finally says, "Here I am the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word"(NRSV, Luke 1:38). Now apparently, the Greek word that is here translated as "servant" would better be translated "slave". And as we know, slaves have no choice in the matter. So, as much as I want to say that Mary had the choice to say yes or no to this preposterous plan, I'm not sure that she did. In Mary, God is working out God's plan. God is bringing into fruition the "real" Mary, the one God has created her to be and is bringing God into flesh.

After hearing the news, Mary leaves her town to visit her cousin Elizabeth. And who could blame her? People were surely going to begin to talk as her belly began to grow. And good grief, what would Joseph do? Certainly her fears and her questions go with her. Has she resigned herself to her fate or is she excited about possibilities at this point? Who knows?

Imagine her joy when she encounters Elizabeth for the first time. Without Mary having to say a word, Elizabeth confirms for her what the angel has said. "You, Mary, are carrying God in

your womb. You are not out of your mind. It is as the angel told you, and I know it!" What marvelous words of affirmation for this young woman to hear!

It is at this point that Mary amazes me most. What has already happened to her is enough to send most of us over the edge. This news, if it is true, is enough for the whole world to tell her story forever. But what she does next is truly astonishing and awe inspiring to me. She sings to God. Not only does she sing to God, but she sings that God has blessed her, and she tells of God's marvelous works for all people.

Mary has chosen to believe. She has chosen to be a willing partner with God in what God is bringing forth within her. She opts for faith, hope, and love. She is not going along with this plan resignedly, she is actively participating in this great good news. She has shown us in these moments, in her beautiful song, that it is better to believe than not to believe.

Maybe Mary didn't have a choice in the beginning, but she certainly had the choice of whether to accept the news and with what attitude she would take the news to the world.

She left behind the world that she knew and turned to face the future as God would have it be. She said yes.

And in saying yes, her song and her story sing to us today. The Good News of Jesus Christ simply must be true if Mary could believe and live it. God chose this young woman to bear the Good News for all people. And as we hear in her song, God, in Christ, has defeated, is defeating, and will continue to defeat the powers of darkness.

Her song announced then of God's great love and of God's triumph over injustice, oppression, and evil. It announces the same to us today. Anna Carter Florence, one of the Preaching and Worship professors at Columbia Theological Seminary says, "If the story of the annunciation is to mean anything to us, it must announce, today, to migrant workers in Texas, that God in Christ has brought down the mighty from their thrones. It must announce, today, to Asian women forced into prostitution that God in Christ has lifted up the lowly. Our Lady of the Seas, Our Lady of the Fields, Our Lady of the Brothels—it is the same Mary, the same peasant

girl who heard the angel, and accepted the news, and set her face toward a future in God's hands" (*Preaching and Worshiping in Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany*, Abingdon Press, 2005, 122).

I wonder what we will say. For we know the rest of the story. Mary did indeed give birth to Jesus the Christ. And we see over and over how God's light penetrates the darkness, how God's power topples the powers of the world. Yet, sometimes we despair. There is still hunger. There is still oppression. There is still war and hatred. There is still loneliness and pain. Can we, knowing and yet not always knowing or understanding, turn with Mary to say yes to God and to continue to proclaim that the Mighty One has done great things for us. Holy is God's name. God has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. God has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly; God has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty.

We are all called to be like Mary. We don't always know what following God will mean. We don't always know the real "us" that God is calling us to be. Sometimes, what God may be calling us to may seem the craziest thing we have ever heard. But, we are called to turn toward God, and to say, "Let it be with me according to your word." And, knowing the rest of the story, we can because we know that Jesus Christ is with us now and forevermore. It is better to believe than not to believe.

And so, we believe. And we go into the world to be a part of what God is doing to bring love and justice, to bring hope and light to the whole world. May it be with us according to your word. Amen.