

“The Lord Is with You”

A Message for Sunday Morning Worship
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC
December 16, 2018 – 3rd Sunday of Advent
Text: Luke 1:26-56

The Scripture text for the third Sunday of Advent always remains the same from year to year.. It is Luke’s description of the Angel Gabriel’s appearance to the girl, Mary, to bring her the news that she had been chosen to be the mother of the long awaited messiah. This Sunday is literally the turning point of Advent when our thoughts shift from the Hebrew Scripture prophecies of the promised messiah to the news on this third Sunday that the Messiah is soon to be born. Emmanuel will soon be here.

That’s why the third Sunday of Advent is always associated with joy. It is the joy that God’s promise of a messiah will soon be fulfilled. It is the joy of the angel in the news he brings to Mary and that she agrees to be part of God’s plan of redemption for the world. It is the joy of Mary’s cousin Elizabeth, herself newly and surprisingly pregnant, whom Mary runs to visit soon after the angel leaves her with this extraordinary news. It is the joy Mary herself feels as she comes to terms with her own extraordinary role in God’s plans. Her song of joy, known as the Magnificat, appears in verses 46-55 and it is quite extraordinary in its tone and message. It’s a wonderful topic for a sermon. But then again,

so are the many other phenomenal moments of this uniquely beautiful passage.

That's why I love preaching on this particular Sunday and I love that the text is always this same one, an incredible story of a young woman, a girl really, who has an incredible encounter with an angel. There are literally dozens of directions in which a preacher can go with this text, which is a good thing since it comes up every year. Most often, I am drawn to Mary herself, to her amazing faith summed up in her response to the angel, "Here am I, servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." I mean, a supernatural being comes to her, tells her she's going to have a baby even though she's never been with a man, and that this baby to be born will be the long-awaited redeemer of her people. And she's totally fine with it. If she hesitated at all, it's nowhere evident in the text. She responds simply and calmly, her faith in God giving her the confidence and strength to be part of the impossible scenario the angel has just described.

"Let it be." Usually that's the phrase that jumps out at me every time I read this story. I've preached on this particular part of the text more than a few times over the years because I find it so powerful and compelling. But, this year, for reasons I could not articulate at the time, that's not the phrase that stuck with me as I read through the text once more as this past week began and I turned my attention to the details of worship. No, this time I was

drawn powerfully not to Mary's response to the angel but instead to the angel's words that began the entire conversation.

“Greetings, O favored one!” Gabriel said as he came to Mary. And that's what the text says he did – came up to her. Simple enough description of an extraordinary moment and one which artists from around the world and across history have endeavored to capture on canvass. But, of course, no one knows what actually happened. Was Gabriel a glorious, shining, golden winged creature shimmering as he hovered in the air just above Mary? Or did Gabriel look virtually identical to Mary, as though she was sitting in front of a mirror talking to herself? Both of these are beautiful depictions of this moment, known as the Annunciation. If you google “Annunciation,” you will literally see dozens if not hundreds of artistic representations. One of my favorites depicts Mary as a 1950's style teeny-bopper with her nose in a book, with a rather intimidating angel just about to interrupt her reading.

Regardless of how you imagine this encounter taking place, consider the next part of the greeting the angel offers Mary – “the Lord is with you.” This would be an odd way to begin any conversation even if you are an angel because it's just not a phrase used to begin a conversation in every day social interactions. “The Lord is with you.” No wonder Mary was perplexed by this greeting, according to the text. Realizing, perhaps, that this was an intimidating way to begin a conversation with a young girl, the

angel continues by saying, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God.” Do not be afraid. I’m sure those were words she needed to hear in that moment but whether or not she believed them right away remained to be seen. As we know, she hears the angel out and agrees to be a part of whatever God has in mind for her. Oh, that we could have that kind of faith – faith to decide in an instant that whatever impossible task or situation God had put in front of us we would be able to respond to so effortlessly. This one moment sets the scene for how Mary will be described from that moment on throughout Christian history – the simple virgin blessed by God as the mother of the Messiah whose faith was complete and total.

The Lord is with you. Five little words and yet they say it all when it comes to life and faith as a Christian. This simple greeting from an angel to a terrified young girl is an important reminder for each and every one of us in these days when life is too busy, too frenetic, too full of stuff and responsibilities and things to remember and do. The Lord is with you. Whatever comes your way each day, the Lord is with you. That is a reality of the Christian life and the one we are most likely to overlook or forget or leave behind, if we ever really think about it much in the first place. The Lord is with you. What does that even mean? Is God walking behind me all day, keeping an eye on everything I do, like some invisible, hovering body guard? Honestly, I don’t know.

What I do know is that I don't think the "how" matters. What does matter is the ability to know as fully as it's possible to know anything – in your heart, in your soul – that God is *with you*, every moment of every day. That there is no place you can be where God is not. Dear friends, that is simply extraordinary and gets at the crux of the whole matter of faith.

As I said earlier, this was not my intended focus for this sermon when I was planning worship for Advent well over a month ago. But, for reasons that I cannot really explain, I realized just this past Tuesday that this sermon was supposed to be about something beyond Mary's extraordinary faith. I wasn't entirely sure why I felt this way on Tuesday as I planned out this service, but I've learned over the years to trust these "gut" feelings when they come to me. This is because I really do work at being open to God as I prepare to lead worship each week, creating an experience for each person here that is unique to them, opening up a space and time for each of them, each of you, to strengthen your connection and your relationship with God. That's why I begin each sermon with prayer as I do. "May the words spoken and the words heard be not mine, oh God, but yours always." I mean every word when I offer that prayer each week. And this week God reminded me exactly why I say that prayer.

Many of you know that my husband Peter has been struggling with eye issues for the past few months. What you

don't know is that these issues go back several years and we learned just recently they have everything to do with the reality that Peter was born two months premature in 1953. Yes, that's what I said. Two months premature in 1953. Peter was due to be born the first week of March in 1953 and instead he was born the first week in January. The only reason he survived is that his father was the head of pediatrics at the Willimantic Hospital where he was born. Those doctors pulled out all the stops to save this tiny baby of a friend and colleague. Many of you don't know that Peter's name was literally pulled out of a hat as they weren't at all sure he would survive and his mother wanted him baptized but she was in no condition to think about names nor was his father. So, all the doctors and nurses put their favorite boy names into a hat and the first two pulled became Peter's name – Peter Gregory. Needless to say, he survived and, while he has a few lingering issues from his premature birth – like the fact that his toes don't bend – he has always been a healthy, vital person. He is truly a living, walking miracle – something we tend to forget all too often. But not this week as yet another miracle in his life made itself known.

As I said earlier, many of you know of Peter's recent eye issues which resulted in emergency laser treatments in his left eye to repair retinal tears followed immediately by emergency surgery for a detached retina in the right eye. That was a rough day, but

we got through it and he seemed to be doing well. The vision in his left eye was perfect once more and the right eye was slowly improving. Then, this past Thursday evening, he started having some problems with the right eye. Unbelievably, he had a recheck appointment with the surgeon the next day, Friday, at noon where we learned that, unbelievably, the retina had re-detached, pulled away by scar tissue. This is an incredibly rare complication for this surgery but there it was. His surgeon was upset. We were upset but we were off to the races once again. We made the mad dash to Sturdy Memorial Hospital in Attleboro for the surgery, this time a much longer and more complicated one, three hours instead of a little over an hour, with full general anaesthetic.

I'll be honest with you, by the time Peter was wheeled off to surgery a little before 6pm that evening, I was numb. When something so dramatic happens, and for a second time, you really have this tendency to do what you need to do in the moment automatically, without a lot of thought. I got some dinner in the cafeteria – I hadn't eaten anything since breakfast – and then I found the waiting room where the wonderful surgical team suggested I hang out the last time – the Intensive Care Family Room. It was empty when I got there, thank goodness. So, I put the television on and collapsed into a chair. Within a few minutes a lady came in, obviously agitated. Within a few minutes we were engaged in conversation during which she told me she was

waiting to go back into ICU to be with her husband who had an unbelievably litany of issues which made Peter's eye surgery pale in comparison. Then she said the most extraordinary thing to me, after listening to why I was waiting in that tiny room. She said, "I'll pray for you and your husband. Prayer is what's getting us through." I told her I believed the same about prayer and that I would pray for her too.

She left a few minutes later and I was alone once more. Realizing how much God had touched me in that moment I decided to see if I could replicate that experience in a different way so I posted the news of what we were going through on Facebook, asking for prayers. Then I watched in absolute amazement as folks responded within minutes to the request. The responses literally piled up as friends and colleagues and folks from this church responded as soon as they saw my request. Dozens and dozens of people offered prayers and words of encouragement to me and I cannot begin to tell you how much that meant to me in that moment. Suddenly I realized I wasn't in that tiny room all alone. You were with me. God was with me. Those responses pouring in reminded me powerfully that the angel was right – "The Lord is with you" – always, in the darkest moments of fear and confusion which is where I was on Friday evening. And the Lord is with you in the most joyful moments too – like the incredible news of a baby to be born.

The Lord is with you! That, dear friends, is the key message, the Good News of Christmas! The Lord is with you – that’s what Emmanuel means. I can’t think of a better Sunday for our new members to be welcomed into this wonderful church than this Sunday when we celebrate the joy of knowing that the Lord is with you, and with me, every moment of every day. God reminded me of just how powerful those words are this week, and he reminded me that it is the community of God’s faithful where those words – “the Lord is with you” – become flesh and blood. For me and Peter this past week they became YOU as you responded to my pleas for prayer in a moment which was one of the scariest I have experienced in my life. Thank you for being God’s hands and feet, God’s gentle presence in my life, and Peter’s, when we needed it most. Thank you for reminding me that the angel’s words “Greetings O favored one” are meant for all of us and not just a frightened girl two thousand years ago. The Lord is with us! Emmanuel is on his way! Thanks be to God! Amen!