

“How Can This Be?”

United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT
December 11, 2022 – Morning Worship on the 3rd Sunday of Advent
Text: Luke 1:26-38

This morning’s text is another familiar one as so many of the texts during Advent are. In these few verses Luke tells us how it came to be that Mary would be Jesus’ mother. It involves an angelic visitation to a terrified young girl. Who wouldn’t be terrified if an archangel came to visit? An archangel was a serious angel for sure, way up there in God’s angel hierarchy. And, contrary to the thousands of young girls who have donned the traditional golden robes to play Gabriel in the Christmas pageant over the years, Gabriel was a male. This is, no doubt, why Mary was even more terrified when he appeared to her with his fantastical news. He quickly reassured her, but I have always thought it was to Mary’s credit that she didn’t just bolt as soon as he appeared out of nowhere.

If you want to explore the imagery of this encounter which has been the subject of literally thousands and thousands of paintings, sculptures, stained glass windows, and the like over the centuries, just Google “the Annunciation to Mary” and see what comes up. Artists have been imagining the conversation between the archangel and this young girl for two millennia. The angel is usually portrayed as huge, sometimes with massive wings which allow him to hover just above Mary as she kneels on the ground terrified. Occasionally, this is portrayed as just some sort of casual conversation happening between two women, one younger and one older. Sometimes there is just the hint of an angel. Often a dove is present, signifying the Holy Spirit soon to come upon Mary to impregnate her with the baby who will become Jesus.

Literally the depictions of this scene are as many and varied as the artists themselves. Clearly this is a story which holds much fascination for us mere mortals and it has for over two thousand years. A virgin gives birth to the baby destined to be the Redeemer of the world. There is no denying a certain fairy tale quality to this story, for sure.

Several aspects of this oh so interesting and mysterious story are worthy of our deeper consideration this morning. We've already clarified that, despite the ways Gabriel is often portrayed in pageants and art, he is in fact a "he." We don't really know how this encounter began. The text just says, "he came to her." We don't know where she was exactly when this happened. In paintings she is often pictured as being outside in a garden or in the courtyard of her home where she is doing something domestic, like spinning wool or picking fruit. In others, we see her sitting in a room by a window, reading a book and the angel appears at her window. However it happened, one minute Mary was by herself and the next Gabriel was there saying, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." Yikes!

The text here says she was perplexed but I think it's likely she was terrified. As a young girl – some estimates offered by biblical scholars place her age as young as 14 – she would never have been allowed to be alone with a man to whom she was not related. And here was this guy suddenly just there. Of course she was scared! He tried to put her at ease by saying, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God." Then without even taking a breath he immediately launches into the plan – for Mary to have this baby – whom the angel then describes as destined for great things. Meanwhile, this young girl is just sitting

there, staring at him. When he's finished with his little speech, she asks him the obvious question --- "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" Again, it is so impressive that she wasn't screaming for help by this point, but she apparently remained calm, calm enough to ask this very logical question. "How can this be?" Gabriel explains that it will be by a special action of God described as "overshadowing" which in the paintings sometimes as appears as a beam of light emanating from the dove hovering just over her head. To prove that God can actually do this amazing thing, he then tells her about her much older cousin Elizabeth who had been thought barren but now is six months pregnant with her child. "For nothing will be impossible with God," the angel explains.

Mary then gives one of the most courageous, faith-filled answers of any of the people in the Bible when confronted with such divine interruption to their lives. She listens to this fantastical story and then tells the angel, "let it be with me according to your word." In other word, she said yes. She agrees to be the mother of this child whose father will be God. That Mary says yes is one of the most courageous acts in the Bible, something she never gets credit for. She was not yet married to Joseph so for her to become pregnant at this point would make her an unwed mother. This was a crime in her day, one punishable by death. She ran the risk of being disgraced and turned out by her own family and rejected by Joseph. Yet she still said yes. She trusted God enough to believe that if this was what God needed her to do, God would not only make it possible, God would also keep her safe while all these plans unfolded. And they did. Matthew's Gospel has Joseph being visited by the angel who tells him what is

going to happen to Mary and that he should not cancel their engagement. Rather, he should love and protect her even more. The rest of the story we will be remembering together in the weeks ahead moves ahead from here.

This story of Mary is simply extraordinary for many reasons. In feminist theological circles, this story gets mixed reviews. The docile Mary who agrees to an impossible scheme is seen as the archetypal perfect woman whose status was elevated through the virgin birth story. Evidence is clear that this elevation of Mary from a minor to major character in Jesus' story was done quite deliberately by the early church for several reasons. First, it was a way for the newly endorsed Christian faith to displace the cult of the Great Goddess of Rome as Christianity was spreading throughout the empire. Artemis, the goddess of the hunt, the wilderness, wild animals, nature, vegetation, childbirth, care of children and chastity¹ was very, very popular among the Romans who knew her as the goddess Diana. The Roman imperial authorities recognized early on that if Christianity was going to be successful, a compelling divine female figure would be necessary. But, she couldn't be someone like Mary Magdalene who traveled with Jesus and the disciples and was known to be a leader among the disciples. A strong female leader was exactly what the early Roman church did not want. So, the Holy Mother Mary, the blessed Mother Mary, became the favorite of all the women of the Christian Gospels. She was that most impossible of things, a chaste mother whose only role was to care for God's son and being in humble adoration of God always. In other words, Mary was the

¹ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Artemis>

perfect submissive woman destined to serve as supreme exemplar for all women.

As a feminist biblical scholar, I know this view of Mary is more accurate than the traditional celebration of her as the chaste mother who came to be revered as being as sinless as her son. But I still feel very drawn to Mary as so many do and have for millennia. I can't explain why. I just am. I find her faith and her strength compelling. I am intrigued by the very little we know about her from the Scriptures. She seemed never to be too far away from Jesus, and we know she was there at the foot of the cross on the day he died. Again, this is a woman with unbelievable strength and unshakeable faith. No wonder she is a woman – the quintessential mother – we all feel we want to know more about. This is why I think there have been so many “sightings” of the Virgin in the last few centuries – Our Lady of Guadeloupe, Our Lady of Fatima, Our Lady of Lourdes, Our Lady of Medjugorje and the list goes on and on. We want to know more about this woman! We want to imagine her as the mother of all of us, the mother of the world. Whether or not we are Catholic, we are drawn to Mary for reasons we can't fully explain or understand.

To the already long list of reasons people for millennia have found Mary so compelling, I would add one more and it's visible in her first question to the angel. “How can this be?” How can this impossible thing you tell me is going to happen, actually happen? Do you really expect me to believe this is possible, and that it will happen to me of all people? Dear ones, these are intelligent questions. This is a woman who understands the facts of life and knows this proposal from the angel is not the way

things work. So, she asks. She asks for more information. She asks how it can happen. She asks, and then she listens to the answer. Then and only then does she agree to the angel's proposal. And she does agree. She says, "let it be with me according to your word." We always forget that she could have said no. She could have said, "Gosh, I'm really flattered that God thinks so much of me, but this is just not how I see my life evolving right now." She could have said that. If she had said that, everything would have been different. God would have had to go back to the drawing board about this whole baby born to a woman thing. We never think about that possibility, do we? We take for granted that Mary said yes, that she would have said yes no matter what because that was God's plan. We forget that Mary said yes because once she understood God's plan and had some idea how it would happen because she asked, she said yes. She said yes because she wanted to be part of God's plan. She knew she was strong enough to be part of God's plan. She knew God was not afraid of her question, had in fact expected it. So, Mary said yes to God's invitation, and everything changed for her and for the world in that moment. She said yes because she trusted God with every fiber of her being. In that she is the true exemplar of simple, trusting faith for all of us.

"How can this be?" was Mary's first response to the angel. Think about that for a minute. Her very first words to this incredible, literally unbelievable news from an angel were to ask a question about how such a thing was even possible. This, dear ones, is where Mary's humanity shines through. She is not some docile, compliant young woman willing to be steam-rolled into a plan she didn't understand. She was a thinking, feeling,

courageous, strong woman who wanted to know what she was getting herself into. This is the Mary I find so fascinating. She is hiding just out of sight in so many of the stories about Jesus. And I think some of Jesus' strength and faith came from her. I think his gentleness and compassion came from her too. He grew up watching her – this strong, quiet woman who said yes to an angel and still dared to ask questions in a society where women were literally supposed to be seen but not heard. Ever. Jesus mother was not silent, even in the face of God's messenger. She asked questions because she needed to know, to understand what was going to happen to her. Her questions did not, do not, diminish her faith. They only make it stronger. She knew that God would not be afraid of her questions. She knew that whatever she would need for this impossible role God was giving her would be provided by this God whom she was trusting with her entire life. In this we find Mary's gift to all of us this Christmas season. She shows us that God is not afraid of our questions, that God expects them and welcomes them. She reminds us that having faith enough to trust God in impossible situations is an active choice, not a passive one. In doing this she invites all of us into a new and deeper relationship with God this Christmas season, a relationship that celebrates wonder and miracles and yet still asks questions trusting that God is in those very questions. She reminds us that God's answers are always forthcoming if we look for them with all of our hearts. "How can this be" we ask ourselves as we ponder Mary's incredible story. That's when she turns to us with that beatific smile that inspired a thousand artists and gives us the answer Gabriel gave her: "For with God nothing is impossible." What more is there to say. Amen.

