

Advent 4 B
2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16
Luke 1:47-55, 26-38
December 21, 2008

Sermon preached by Laura Merrill
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What do you want for Christmas? We want all sorts of things. When you start at the top of the list, we want stuff, things that would make our lives more comfortable or pleasant or that would compliment what we already do. Stuff is always big at Christmas. The next layer down, though, might be more significant – we want good things to happen to us and to people we love, want a kind of happiness that resembles an absence of difficulty and conflict. We want our kids to have a good experience in school, and we want to keep our jobs, and we hope we don't get sick, and we hope the economy will hold up at least enough for us to make our bills. And for some folks, this is about as deep as they want to go, consciously at least—if all of these things are in line, we figure life is good.

Those are good things, but you and I both know there's yet another layer underneath. There are other desires we carry with us in life. These we mostly keep below the surface, hidden from the rest of the world and even from ourselves; these we're a little afraid of, because they can be so powerful. This layer of desire can reach back into childhood, into times we got hurt or learned to be afraid or not to trust the world. This layer of desire fuels our knee jerk reactions to things, our misplaced anger, our defensiveness and our selfishness. It's the place inside where what we want most is to rest at ease, to believe that we're going to be OK, to feel secure. Unfortunately, much of life throws at us two things: assaults and attacks on the deepest desires of

our hearts, and the many pretenders who promise to protect and fulfill us but who cannot deliver.

The Christmas season may be one of the best times to see clearly the gap between what we really want and what the world around us offers us. Marketers spend a lot of money every year trying to figure out how to get inside our heads, to associate what they're selling with what we think we need. Yet most of us have probably had the experience of opening all the presents Christmas morning, as Rip said the other night at communion, and asking to ourselves, "Is that all there is?" That sounds like a superficial question, but it's really a deep question, a question that comes from the depths of the heart. What do you want most? What do you really want? Hold that question, and ponder it.

Meanwhile, let's look to the texts this week, especially those from Luke. The story of Mary and the angel Gabriel holds a powerful witness for any who seek the true desire of the heart. My first real encounter with this story was when I was about seven months pregnant with Joe, and a friend gave me a birthday present of a three-day silent retreat. I was in a good place in my life: I was finished with seminary and working in a wonderful job at Emory University, Chris had a great job, my health was good, and the pregnancy was progressing well. But as this kid inside me started to get just a little too big for the space available, somewhere inside I started to panic. It was summertime, and I had begun climbing the steep hill in front of our apartment every evening after work to get in the pool and swim. I was trying to find relief from feeling

like my lungs were going to collapse at the hands of this little invader. I was afraid I might suffocate inside my own body.

So I went on this retreat, on the brink of losing my mind. What was happening inside my body began to point toward a deeper reality, which was that I just didn't feel big enough in any way to do this. I certainly didn't feel physically big enough, but emotionally the import of what was coming was starting to dawn on me, too. It may be that not everybody goes there while they're waiting for babies to come. I did, however; I've always worried about doing things right, following the rules, and it was becoming clear to me that raising up another human being was going to be a task much bigger than I thought I could manage correctly.

So the retreat included an hour each day with Faye, the woman who ran the place; that was the only part that wasn't silent. We met the first day, and she gave me these texts from the first chapter of Luke to read. She told me to think about them and do some writing in my journal. So I sat down and started reading, and the first thing I felt in reaction to Mary was, "that's so not me." I read the story and saw Mary as willing and compliant, the stiff, perfect kind of Mary we see up in stained glass windows, with this serene, unflustered look on her face, like she's on Xanax, calm and completely at ease with what is happening to her. "Let it be with me according to your will." What a good girl, the perfect woman.

I couldn't think of anything less similar to what I was feeling at the time. I stewed about it, and I got mad at Mary for being so capable, and mad at myself for being so not. I took my righteous frustration back to Faye the next day and presented

to her my righteous conviction that Mary and I had nothing in common, that I just could not relate to her perfection and that I was actually pretty aggravated to have had to even think about it. Faye told me to go back and look again at the story. So I went back, and I read it aloud, and this time it registered; it wasn't as open and shut as I'd first thought. Mary was perplexed at the angel's greeting, or in other translations, troubled or disturbed, wondering and pondering what it might mean. The angel Gabriel told her not to be afraid, which indicates that maybe she looked like she was afraid; once Gabriel laid out the plan for her, she questioned it – how can this be?; and finally, only at the end, after hearing that her old cousin Elizabeth was also pregnant, only then does she give in and say, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord."

Faye showed me lots of different ways I could connect with this story—we can take the different characters in any Bible story and see what we might have in common with them, or how they might speak to us. Faye said I could see myself as something like Mary, called by God to bear a little piece of light into the world. She also encouraged me to see myself in turn as carried in the womb of God, myself as God's child, even as I approached this new life as a mother that seemed so overwhelming to me. That was one of the first times thinking of God as mother really hit home for me. Where I felt inadequate, I knew that the body of God, which held and nurtured my life, was more than capable of the task.

The lasting gift of all this is that it wasn't just about helping me feel OK about being pregnant. Over and over I've reflected on my retreat experience, and the way I felt a whole new perspective opening up before me. I had a new awareness of the true

scale of things—I had been so focused on what I was worried about, yet I came to see that task of having a baby as encompassed by this enormous life, this huge context or womb of love in which I had my little place. It's something like that very common experience of looking up into the sky at night out in the middle of nowhere and taking in the immensity of even that tiny part of the universe we're able to see. But it's knowing too that the immensity that surrounds us means us well, loves us and gives us life.

I believe it is in allowing ourselves to discover that panoramic love of God and then in surrendering ourselves to it—that's where we find salvation. We find our lives and their fulfillment when we find our true place in the heart and will of God. To recognize what we are and what we are not, and most especially what God is—this is to find what we've been looking for all our lives, what we've searched for in all the wrong places, what we've tried to tell ourselves we didn't really need. Somehow Mary, confronted by this angel bringing perplexing news, was able to say yes. She heard the word that no thing was impossible with God, and she said, so may that possibility rest upon me.

And the song she sang as a result! Her words, which we read for the canticle, show that she had indeed stared up into that endless darkness and found there love and power. For she sang of a new world that God was birthing, a world oriented to love and not to pride, a world turned on its head, filling the bellies of the poor and gathering in the outcasts; setting right the imaginations of the rich and the conceit of the proud. And she sang, knowing that what was happening in her would have an

impact far beyond her own life. Now, maybe you'll say, well duh, she was pregnant with Jesus, and of course he would change the world. But I believe there is something transformational, revolutionary, earth-shattering that happens when God connects with us on that deep level and we get it, we let it happen. I'm not sure exactly how it happens, but the shift that happens inside our hearts is intimately, inextricably linked to the change God is working in the world. When we let the change happen in us, we find our place in the change happening around us.

So we're on notice; God is turning the world on its head and wants us in on it. This is what it means for me today to be baptizing David and Ardis Barnett; they are coming later in life than many, but they're seeking God and God's purposes in their lives in a new way, and you can bet that God's going to bring something new out of them as a result. It takes courage to do what the Barnetts are doing today, if only because it means turning ourselves over to this earth-shattering love.

If the rest of us also decide to follow this same path, we too will have some choices to make. Will they challenge us? You bet. Will they bring us pain? Probably. But we need not be afraid. For following Mary through the confusing and the uncertain will also be the path that takes us home. Singing her song in humility and gratitude and awe will finally be what knocks down our proud pretenders and fills our hearts with joy. Singing her song will finally satisfy our deepest desire. And her song will link us to a world full of people who all have desires of the heart, who all need fulfillment and peace, who all have a place in the body of God where they will find themselves at home.

It requires a lot of inner solitude and silence to become aware of these divine movements. God does not shout, scream or push. The Spirit of God is soft a

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nd gentle like a small voice or a light breeze. It is the spirit of love. Maybe we still do not fully believe that God's Spirit is, indeed, the Spirit of love, always leading us deeper into love. Maybe we still distrust the Spirit, afraid to be led to places where our freedom is taken away. Maybe we still think of God's Spirit as an enemy who wants something of us that is not good for us.

But God is love, only love, and God's Spirit is the Spirit of love longing to guide us to the place where the deepest desires of our hearts can be fulfilled. Often we ourselves do not even know what our deepest desire is. We so easily get entangled in our own lust and anger, mistakenly assuming that they tell us what we really want.

The Spirit of love says: "Don't be afraid to let go of your need to control your own life. Let me fulfill the true desire of your heart."

(Henri J. M. Nouwen, from *Here and Now*,
quoted in *A Guide to Prayer For All Who Seek God*, p. 44)