

Eve of Incarnation

Lk 2.1-20

I'd like to draw our attention to something in our gospel lesson that we usually ignore. It's not surprising that we tend to overlook it: there is, after all, a lot going on. We've got an emperor determined to measure exactly how powerful and how important he is, we've got a family making a rather risky cross-country journey at a very inopportune time, we've got a choir of angels belting it out for all they're worth, we've got shepherds running back and forth proclaiming the amazing news that the messiah had been born.

And then we have Mary; turn your attention there for a minute. She doesn't say much; she doesn't do much. Things happen *to* her—she's forced to endure the trip to Bethlehem, she undergoes the labor and the pain of childbirth, she puts up with a bunch of excitable and inquisitive shepherds who insist on seeing her infant son. But she herself does very little.

Except for one thing: she hears what is said about her son, and she ponders these things in her heart. The image of Mary we're given by Luke is that of someone who manages to remain still and silent in the midst of the chaos going on around them. And in that stillness and that silence, she finds the meaning of all that's happening around her.

That's a helpful image for us, because we've just come through a rather chaotic year. There has been, to say the least, a lot going on in our lives and in the world, so much so that I don't even need to remind you of the events and challenges of the last several months. Our hearts have been restless and anxious, our minds have been distracted, our lives have been frayed by all that's happened.

And in the face of these challenges, we've had to confront two temptations: our first temptation has been to try and *do* something about it all, and our second temptation has been to give in to frustration and anxiety and despair. But Mary shows us a different way, a way that is better suited to helping us recognize the presence of God in our lives, to recognize the one who is born this day as God with us.

Mary's actions in this story are consistent with the way she is described at other points in the gospels. Luke makes a point of describing her response when the angel Gabriel first comes to her to tell her she will bear a child who will be called the Son of God. Gabriel's message is full of extraordinary and even confusing news: the power of the Most High will overshadow Mary and her child will be the Son of the Most High, he will inherit the throne of David, he will reign over the house of Jacob forever. I expect Mary had a hard time absorbing all of that. And yet, she responds with stillness and with silence: "Here am I, the servant of the Lord: let it be to me according to your word." An unexpected visit from a messenger who brings a confusing and unsettling word, and she responds with quietness and trust and surrender.

Nor are the Annunciation and the Nativity the only times Mary is described in this way. Twelve years after Jesus is born, the family goes to Jerusalem to observe the festival of Passover, and when the festival is over and the family heads for home Jesus slips away and stays behind in the

temple. Mary and Joseph return to Jerusalem desperate to find their son, and when they find him he says to them, “What’s the problem? Didn’t you know I would be here?” And again, Luke tells us, she hears this and receives it and treasures it in her heart, reflecting on it and ruminating on all it means.

And, of course, there’s one other time Mary appears at an event in the life of her son during which she exhibits remarkable silence and stillness; that’s at the cross. Having brought Jesus into the world, having watched him grow up, having observed him throughout his ministry, Mary is still with him when he dies. And again, her presence is marked chiefly by patient stillness and attentive silence as she waits to see what it is God is doing in and through her son.

Of course, if we’re honest, we should acknowledge that even Mary occasionally gave in to the temptation to abandon stillness and silence. Jesus and his disciples are invited to a wedding and Mary is there with them, and when they run out of wine what does she do? “Don’t worry, my son will take care of everything.” Sometimes even her enthusiasm got the better of her.

But overall, Mary provides us with an example of someone whose life is ordered by a kind of persistent tranquility, a capacity for silence that makes her attentive to God’s voice, an ability to act by not moving, a willingness to allow things to happen to her rather than trying to make them happen herself.

If there’s anything in the gospels that provides us with a clue as to why God chose her, I think this is it. When Gabriel greets Mary, he tells her she is “full of grace.” Mercy and grace are usually gifts we can receive only when we are silent and still. Gabriel says to Mary, “The Lord is with you.” Like Elijah on Mount Horeb who encountered God, not in wind or in fire or in earthquake, but in stillness and in peace and who found that God drew near in sheer silence, Mary’s capacity for repose brought her close to the living God.

Right about now I expect you may be thinking how hopelessly unrealistic this sounds. Silence and stillness look good on greeting cards and may work for holiday television specials, but silence and stillness have little to nothing to do with today’s world. Ours is a world governed by activity and noise, so much so that we’re actually uncomfortable with silence and stillness. Even if this *hadn’t* been a year that was shaped by a global pandemic and social and political unrest and economic uncertainty and all the rest of it, there’s still more than enough activity and noise to go around; even normal life can be distracting.

But acknowledging that fact and admitting to our tendency to allow ourselves to be distracted by the noise and overwhelmed by the activity puts us right in the middle of the Christmas story. Any time we bump up against the disparity between the gospel and our day-to-day experience, it’s an invitation to grow in faith. And this day, God comes to us in a way that requires us to be attentive if we are to see him: today God comes to us as a helpless child.

When we recognize the stillness and the silence at the heart of this story, then we also begin to see how it relates to us. This is not just a story about something that happened 2,000 years ago somewhere on the other side of the world. This is a story about what God has been doing in the world ever since that first Christmas night, and even before that. This is about what God is doing

right here and right now: pouring out his life and his love and his power onto this world so the world can be delivered from darkness and freed from its bondage to brokenness and death.

What kind of a sign are we given? The shepherds were given the sign of a child in a manger. If the angel's message is for us, if the gift of the messiah is for us, is there something we can look to that might perhaps give us a glimpse of the same presence of God with us that the shepherds found?

I think there is. We probably won't see him if we're looking for a big, dramatic, powerful sign. We're not going to walk out of here and discover that all the problems and challenges of our lives have been fixed for us—the God who comes to us as a helpless infant doesn't seem to be overly concerned about his own dignity or about impressive displays of power.

But if we look in the hidden places, in the fragile places, there we will see him. We might glimpse him in a bit of bread that is broken and some wine that is poured out and offered in his name. We might sense him when we allow all the other things that crowd around us and demand our attention to fall away until there's nothing left but his tremendous, unobtrusive presence. We might hear him in the silent prayer of our heart, in a hope that's been buried so deep that we might not even be sure it's there.

This is the example Mary gives us: one who is attentive to all that is happening, but who is not distracted by any of it because she knows where the true meaning of it all is to be found, having found that meaning in stillness and in silence. This is the example Jesus himself gives us, for he comes to us today as he came to us then, in a way and a time we might not expect, a way that requires attentive listening and trust.

This is how we hear the story of Christmas: in quietness and in trust and in wonder over the great work that God has done. This is good news of great joy for all people, for Mary and for Joseph, and for shepherds, and for Jews and for Gentiles, and for the rich and the poor, and for the joyful and the brokenhearted. For to you is born this day in the city of David a savior who is Christ the Lord. Glory to God in the highest heaven, and peace to his people on earth.

24 December 2020
Trinity Episcopal Cathedral
Columbia, SC