

Advent 4B
2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16
December 20, 2020
Luke 1:46b-55
Virginia Synod
Romans 16:25-27
Online Sermon
Luke 1:26-38



*And [Gabriel] came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God."
Luke 1:28-30*

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Before my husband Joseph and I had children, which is to say during a time in our lives when we had a lot of free time, we'd sometimes visit an Orthodox church and occasionally worship alongside its community.

As is customary in the Orthodox Church, the worship space is filled with icons—images of the faith, images of Jesus and the apostles, of the matriarchs and patriarchs of the faith. One icon in particular has captivated my imagination for some time. It's an image of Mary—mother of our Lord. In the icon, Mary is central—placed exactly in the middle—and her womb is on fire. Flames radiate from every angle.

She is like the burning bush.

You may recall the story. During the time of slavery in Egypt, Moses goes to Mt Sinai where he encounters an angel of the Lord who appears in a burning bush. Because the presence of God is in that bush, it is ablaze but miraculously is not consumed by the fire. From that bush, God speaks to Moses, telling him to take off his shoes for the ground he's standing on is holy ground. The Lord God tells Moses the cries of the Israelites have been heard and they will be led out of slavery into freedom.

Like the burning bush before her, the presence of God dwells in Mary's womb and yet she is not consumed nor destroyed by God's presence inside her.

The season of Advent ends with a pregnant woman. We meet her for the first time in today's gospel.

Part of our Christian tradition calls her the *Theotokos*, the Mother of God, and shows her holding the Christ child.

But today, we meet not the Mary who is Mother but the Mary who is pregnant, the one whose womb is aflame with God's presence.

Advent ends with a pregnancy, and pregnancy is largely about waiting.

Waiting is what pregnant women do. Some wait beyond the first trimester to tell anyone they're expecting. Others wait for genetic tests and glucose tests and gender-revealing ultrasounds. Women wait for first kicks and somersaults in the womb. They wait through hot summer nights and swollen ankles and aching backs; they wait for the first painful signs new life is on its way.

The waiting can be joyful and expectant and hopeful—filled with possibility for the future. And the waiting can be worrisome and disrupting, despairing even, filled with medical tests and fears about the future, doubts about how a child will be supported and cared for and what their future will look like.

It occurred to me last week we've been waiting through COVID-19 for about 9 months—the length of a full-term pregnancy. This time has been a period of disruption. Our normal way of life has been turned upside down. We long for things to return to how they used to be while also knowing our world has been radically altered. Something new is being brought to life but we can't yet see or fully grasp what it is or what it'll mean for our lives going forward.

To be honest, we're all a bit tired of the waiting. It's beginning to feel like an overdue pregnancy. Pandemic fatigue, it's called. We're weary from carrying this weight around, weary from trying to parse out what it all might mean. Weary from navigating the different sides we're taking about the virus itself. Weary from not seeing the ones we love the most. Even with the very hopeful news of a vaccine arriving in our state, many of us still have months of waiting before we receive one.

So we continue to wait with worry for ourselves, for those we love and for those most vulnerable to this virus. We despair when the numbers of infections just keep increasing and the death toll rises and experts say to prepare for the darkest winter we've ever known. We worry for children, for the ones in unsafe homes and the ones who don't have support for learning at home. We worry about the mental health of those who are most isolated and living alone. We worry about the economy and business owners.

Mary has all kinds of reasons to be worried.

She's just a girl, maybe about 13 years of age, from a very small town—only about 50-75 households are in her village. News will travel fast around town about how she's pregnant and not yet married. News like this could mean death for her, a public stoning for being pregnant outside of marriage. Even if her life is spared, it will be very, very hard. She's a poor peasant, a worker, who will labor every day carrying water, managing a household, cooking over an open fire, planting and gathering a harvest. And her feet will swell and her belly will grow and she'll carry the burden of public shame and worry each and every day.

But surprisingly fear and worry don't stop Mary, and in this way, Mary is a model of faithfulness for us all.

When the angel Gabriel first meets Mary, he calls her favored and tells her “the Lord is with you!”

Mary is perplexed and wonders what kind of greeting this can be.

Within the societal norms of Mary's time, there's nothing about Mary that should make her favored. She's from the side of town nobody would want to visit after dark, she lacks power, position; she's young and in a vulnerable place.

It's no small thing to be regarded, favored, to be seen especially when you're aware you shouldn't be and Mary is perplexed.

And then the angel tells Mary: do not be afraid.

The words are spoken even before Mary knows she has reason to be afraid, before the angel tells her how she's going to conceive and bear a son who will come from the line of David and be an even greater king than he..

What makes Mary say “yes” despite her worry, despite the risk to her own life, despite her fear, despite the harm to her reputation?

Mary must have known something about the character of this God whom Gabriel proclaims is with her.

Mary must know this God has pursued her people for generations upon generations leading them out of slavery, setting their feet in the promised land, forgiving them over and over again, leading them as a shepherd over the tallest mountains and through the deepest valleys of death, setting a table before them every step of the way.

Mary must trust in a God who is faithful to the promises he's made and whose love has pursued her time and time again.

Despite how bad things look, Mary's able to move beyond her fear and beyond her worry and lay claim to the promises set before her. Because God is faithful, fear will not stop her from being about what God has called her to do.

If there's any message we are longing to hear more than ever right now, it might just be the message from Gabriel to Mary--despite how bad things look, God is with you.

In the waters of baptism, God claims you, names you, looks upon you with favor. God sees you, precious child, in all your frailty and in your strength, in your stubbornness and in your openness, in your fear and in your courage, in your grief and in your joy. God sees you. It is no small thing to be seen and favored by God, especially if we think we're too insignificant to be seen.

I admit, many days I'm not quite there. But I see glimmers of hope along the way and maybe you do, too. God is with us—masked and hiding in plain sight—in the lives and faces of so many who continue to be about the work God has called them to despite their own worry and fear.

Just last Sunday, the church I'm a part of, Epiphany in Richmond, gathered for an outdoor, socially distanced living nativity. Before the enacting of the Christmas story, a member of the congregation shared a Chrismon as a gift to the children who had gathered in their cars to watch the play. Each year, this member crafts a new Chrismon, a symbol for Jesus, and distributes them to the children of the congregation.

This year's Chrismon, the Sun of Righteousness, she'd chosen last December, in 2019, before news of the virus entered our daily lives. The image is of a sun with rays of light emanating from its center. You might know the sun's outer layer, the part that shoots off flames of heat and light, is called the sun's corona.

And so we have this image of Jesus, the Light, the Sun, who comes as God with us, whose light extends beyond its center and shatters darkness in every corner of the earth, the deepest parts of our lives. The light of Jesus is a healing light.

You are bearers of this light. For in Holy Baptism, the Spirit is planted in you and you shine as lights in a world steeped in darkness. Despite worry and despite fear, you, God's faithful people, have continued to be about the work God has called you to do especially in these dark times—feeding the hungry, providing gifts for families at Christmas, crafting masks to care for the health of our neighbors, reaching out to those who are isolated and alone.

As we wait for that beautiful day when we can gather safely together, God is with us—persistently nurturing the gift of faith growing in us—until the day it can live outside of us, taking on flesh in the world.

Dear ones, God sees you, sees your distress, your sorrow, your worry and your joy and does not turn away. Our lives have been completely disrupted, rearranged by the events of 2020. We

are feeling our way into an uncertain future—not unlike Mary did when she learned she was pregnant.

We wait but not without hope, because the God who sees us, who regards us with favor makes the impossible possible.

This is the God who opens the Red Sea and gives the people a way through when all seems lost. The same God who makes dry bones dance in a death-filled desert. The God who rescues Daniel from the lion's death and Jonah from the belly of a fish.

This is the God who will bring forth a child from Mary, a child she will cradle and nurture and release to the world.

This child will disrupt all the world's notions of right and wrong and will turn the world upside down—the rich will be emptied and the hungry fed, the powerful brought low and the weak made strong.

And when the world grows weary of him and hangs him from a cross, this child, God in the flesh, will make the impossible possible once again. Life will burst from a darkened tomb and death will be destroyed.

The sun of righteousness rises with healing in his wings for you and for me and for this whole weary world.

Thanks be to God.
Amen.