

**“Strange Places: Crisis”
the Third Sunday of Advent**

**Luke 1:26-38
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In the sixth month [of Elizabeth’s pregnancy] the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin’s name was Mary. And he came to her and said, “Greetings, favoured 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 favour with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.”

Mary said to the angel, “How can this be, since I am a virgin?” The angel said to her, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God.” Then Mary said, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” Then the angel departed from her.

This Advent, our theme is called “Strange Places”, inspired by the cantata that our Senior and Children’s choirs will be offering in worship next Sunday. So for the last few weeks, we’ve been pondering some of the very strange places that God can be found. We spent some time with the priestly couple Elizabeth and Zechariah, Mary of Nazareth’s distant relatives, and considered how God came close to them in their barrenness and old age. And we bumped into John the Baptist last week, and wrestled with how God can be found in the voices of protest, the ones who drag our attention to the realities that we would rather deny and avoid.

This morning, we meet Mary of Nazareth, Mary the mother of Jesus. Right away, I knew the theme would be “Strange Places: Crisis.” After all, finding yourself young, unwed and pregnant could throw you into crisis at most points in history, and especially during the first century in Palestine.

Because it wasn’t just that she was young and unwed and pregnant, it was that she was also engaged to be married. Betrothed and pregnant was a dangerous combination. Her family, first of all, would be furious. In ancient Palestine, the purity of the women in his family reflected on the honour of the head male, the father. Mary being pregnant before her marriage would be a source of shame for her father and entire family.

Not only that, her fiancé would be perfectly justified in refusing to marry her, because of her obvious infidelity. And, the village would gossip about her and make her a social outcast. Her only option, if she managed to escape the punishment for adultery of execution or being sold into slavery, was to leave her home and village and try to make her own way in the world, with prostitution being the only real way of surviving.

It was a crisis, all right. So just like the last two Sundays, I went looking for the good news in the story, for the way God was present, was found, in the strange place that Mary found herself, the place of crisis. And that's when I noticed that I had it all wrong when I chose the title. Because once I really read her story again, I realized that it wasn't that she was in crisis, and then God came to her. It was the other way around! God became present to Mary, God found her, God came to her, and THAT is what brought the crisis.

Well, that gave me a sinking feeling, because I often say that I don't believe God makes bad things happen to us. I don't accept that God sends suffering upon us, either to test us, or to build up our faith or our character. The God that I read about in Scripture, the God that I've experienced and known in my life, is love and love never willingly wishes harm or pain or ill on the beloved.

So then what is really happening in Mary's story? After all, it does look an awful lot like it **is** God that brings this catastrophic crisis into her life. Things were going just fine for Mary before God, in the form of the messenger Gabriel, felt the need to intervene. And what is it that God feels compelled to bring into her life? Ah, there's where it gets interesting. Because it's not a crisis that God sends, but an invitation that God offers.

An invitation. And not just any invitation, but an invitation that will take not just her will and her courage, her conviction and her trust, but her very body, her very future. The invitation is nothing less than to bear God into the world.

Now that's an invitation! To be part of bringing new life, new possibility, to birth? To work with God for the transformation of the world, by the power of love? *That* invitation is overwhelming, is humbling, is amazing, is breath-taking in its majesty. But...there's a catch. New life, new possibility, transformation, the power and presence of God, also bring the possibility of dishonor and shame, of danger and risk, and even death. In other words...*crisis*. The crisis that results from accepting God's invitation to transform the world.

Last week, most of the ministers from the five United Churches on the West Side of Vancouver met together. It was a year to the day that leaders from these five churches, Dunbar Heights, West Point Grey, University Hill, Trinity and Knox started meeting regularly to wonder about how we might be called to minister together. Together, we've decided to hire a facilitator called Chris Corrigan, to help us have intentional conversations to help discern our future together, starting in the new year.

So last week, all the ministers who could met together, with Chris, for an initial exploring of what the leadership is that he offers, and what our hopes and dreams are for this upcoming process of conversation and discernment. And he began by asking us to consider and share the answer to a very simple but profound question. The question was, "What secret possibility is hidden in your heart?"

You could have heard a pin drop in the room, as for at least five minutes Cathy and I, and Ken our VST student, and Jay from Knox, and Beth from Trinity, and Val from West Point Grey, all let the question settle into us. We were ready to dash right into logistics, and procedures, and criteria, and planning, and he stopped us with a question, an invitation to think

about the secret possibility that was giving us hope and life.

I immediately started thinking about all my hopes for what our conversations together as five congregations might lead to. I hope, for example, that as many as possible will be able to enter the dialogue as freely as possible from any predetermined outcomes. I hope that we will all be able to put the vision of a vibrant, sustainable United Church presence on the West Side, ahead of our attachment to our own sacred spaces.

But the longer I thought, the more I realized that those were my hopes, rather than the secret possibility that God had planted within me. And soon, I knew the secret possibility hidden in my heart. I said to the other ministers what I'll say to you: the secret possibility I am yearning to believe is that God is more powerful than I know, or believe, or trust her to be.

That is it. That is the secret possibility, the invitation that God is asking me to accept, to commit to, to live into. That God is so powerful, with the awesome power that is love, that I don't have to worry about what might happen, or manoeuvre myself into being in charge, or be anxious about the risks and possible costs of entering into a shared future with one or two or more other congregations. I can actually surrender, let go, trust that God is in charge. Trust that God has a secret possibility for me and for all of us that is currently beyond what we can ask or imagine. And, that possibility carries within it all the elements of a crisis: uncertainty, disagreement, change, loss, withdrawal, giving up.

As the poet Ann Weems has written, "In regard to Mary, one lesson to be learned was how to receive a blessing that caused more problems than it solved." So if there is a lesson we can learn from Mary, about how to faithfully accept that invitation, even with its accompanying crisis, what would it be? According to the story, when presented with a chance to be part of God's plan, Mary was confused, anxious and full of questions. Yet, when presented with that terrifying, wonderful, awe-full choice, Mary said yes, despite the doubts, despite the fear, despite the self-doubt. She took a leap of faith, and believed the angel's words, that nothing is impossible for God, and said, "yes." She said yes, she was willing to take hold of the unknown life the angel held out to her, for good or ill, whatever it would bring, danger or joy, and trusted that God would be in it all and through it all.

Trust...courage...commitment. That is what it is required to accept God's invitation to change the world. Luckily for Mary, and luckily for us, we don't have to manufacture them ourselves. Because... did you hear it? Mary is promised a special gift. No, not the gift of the baby; before that. It is the gift that makes the secret possibility come into being.

The angel says, "The Holy Spirit will come upon that, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you..." What will make all this possible, what will create this new future with all its danger and joy, is the overarching embrace of God's Spirit. And it is that embrace that gives courage, and trust, and hope, and strength to endure and overcome and even transform the crisis that accompanies the invitation.

How favoured are we by God, that we too are overshadowed, embraced by the Holy Spirit. How favoured are we, to be graced with the trust and the courage to say, "Yes, here am I, the servant of the Lord. Let it be with me according to your word." This season of Advent we

ask that God bless and bring to birth the secret possibilities hidden with the hearts of each one of us, and the unknown future that God has in store for us as a congregation. And we ask for the blessing of courage, to say yes to the invitation to bring new life and new hope, even in the crisis, knowing that it is exactly there that God will be found.

This is good news...thanks be to God!

Amen.