

Luke 1: 26-38 "In the Mess" Rev. Janet Chapman 12/20/2020

A big thank you to our skit performers for this virtual version of Gabriel's encounter with Mary. What you did not see in the video was the convoluted dynamics that occurred beforehand. Who knew what a blessed mess it could be to coordinate tablets, laptops, and phones to access the same Zoom backgrounds, teach Zoom for those who had never used it, find enough spaces for each cast member to broadcast from their own room, and practice just the right amount of times so as not to lose the youngest members of our group? A big thank you to Mikayla who handled much of it without fussing at me too much. I don't know what I'll do technologically speaking when she heads off for law school. In case you haven't picked up, I really appreciate the part children of all ages play in presenting the Christmas story. The 4 pm Christmas Eve worship in the parking lot will include an adaptation of Las Posadas, the Mexican tradition of reenacting Mary and Joseph searching for a place to stay in Bethlehem. I also loved the Christmas crafts the kids used to do in Sunday School – and will prayerfully do again when this mess is over. I was reminded this week about a pastor dad who wanted to teach his 4 year old what Christmas was all about by buying a cardboard cutout nativity scene which the two of them could assemble together. In the act of assembly, he planned to talk about each figure – Mary, Joseph, baby Jesus, the stable, the manger, sheep, cows and shepherds. "Fold on the dotted line," the directions said. "Place tab A in slot B," etc. Easier read than done, of course, and within a few minutes, it was a disaster. Nothing worked as intended, nothing looked like the picture on the box. The pastor dad had all but taken over, but he didn't do any better than the 4 year old. The table was littered with torn, bent, spineless figures just wilting over; pieces were frayed and taped together. The dad was ready to trash the whole thing when the 4 year

old, who was supposed to be learning the real meaning of Christmas, asked, “So, Daddy, where is God in this mess?” Hmm... Where is God in this mess?

Courtney Crump reminds us that this is the question for Advent 2020 as we look towards Christmas. Where exactly is God, in all this mess? Somewhere someone set up half the night last night – a restaurant owner whose business is near to collapse – trying to figure out how to not lay off any more staff and still pay the utilities: “Where is God,” they wondered “amidst this shutdown?” Somewhere a spouse watches through a tablet placed at the bedside of their loved one in the overflowing ICU as each breath is labored and heavy, awaiting news of any change: “Where is God, in this terrifying drama?” Somewhere a student moves through her senior year of high school aware this isn’t how it is supposed to be and grieving the loss of traditional senior experiences: “Where is God in the disappointment?” Somewhere a single parent tries to count out her dimes and quarters to make sure there is food on the table and a dollar store gift under the tree: “Where is God in the scarcity?” Somewhere a mother worries about her son going to get groceries after dark wearing his favorite hoodie because it is cold, listening to his favorite jam on his headset, unaware of suspicious minds who do not trust the color of his skin: “Where is God in the fear and uncertainty?” Where on earth is God in all this chaos?

Our story today reminds us that just as God was with Mary, so God is with all of those situations, right there in the middle of our mess. The first thing Gabriel says to Mary is, “The Lord is with you.” Then he says, as the kids so buoyantly shouted out, “Do not be afraid.” These are words that deserve to be boldly proclaimed because there are so many voices who would silence such encouragement. When the word came out that a COVID vaccine was soon

to be released, the numbers of those willing to take it were relatively low. Much suspicion surrounded it. Some might call me a fool to have signed up for the trials; after all, we do not know what the long-term effects may be. I would have to trust in previous trials conducted and in the theories of cellular structure that pointed to a retraining of cells in order to be able to battle the virus effectively. As the doctor of the trial spent time with my daughter Mikayla and I explaining the vaccine's development, I began to understand that what is called "messenger RNA technology" has been around for awhile, but there simply hadn't been the urgency let alone the money to fund mass scale trials. The medical technology and chemistry had originally been developed as a way to retrain the cells to fend off cancer, and with excitement in his eyes, the doctor shared his dream. If this vaccine truly works as it is designed, its basic premise could lead not only to the end of this pandemic, but to developing a personalized cancer vaccine in the next few years as well. That is not something I am hearing in the media, so I can only share with you what both Mikayla and I were told and refer you to a recent Bloomberg article where the Pfizer/BioNTech CEO is interviewed. As it turns out, we are 99% sure Mikayla received the Moderna vaccine whereas I got the Pfizer placebo. Some said I should be afraid but from the beginning, fear has never been a part of the equation for me, only this sense of assurance that God is working in miraculous ways, not just to save a generation but to save generations to come. All of us know someone who has had cancer, even lost their battle with cancer, and we have lived with its devastating effects on humanity for too long. The reality that the impossible cure might become possible through this mess would be something to shout about, for sure! There is no doubt we are living in a messy world right now, but the angel reminds us, "Don't be afraid - Nothing is impossible for God."

One of my favorite poets, Madeline L'Engle, describes the birth of Christ into our messy world in poignant and prophetic tones: "He did not wait till the world was ready, till people and nations were at peace. He came when the Heavens were unsteady, and prisoners cried out for release. He did not wait for the perfect time. He came when the need was deep and great... In the mystery of the Word made Flesh, the Maker of the stars was born. We cannot wait until the world is sane to raise our songs with joyful voice, to share our grief, to touch our pain, He came with Love: Rejoice! Rejoice!"