

The Mystery of Mary

Sermon for Advent 4, Year A

The Rev. Bea Chun

1:23 "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, "God is with us."

Matthew 1:23

Grace to you and peace from the one who is and the one who was and the one who is to come.

When I was a little girl in Germany
we did not decorate a Christmas tree;
We did not even buy a Christmas tree,
because we did not have to.

Each Year on Christmas Eve
The Christmas Fairy brought our Christmas tree!

We were usually upstairs in my Grandmother's living room
having dinner
When suddenly we heard a little bell,
and we knew exactly what that meant:
The Christmas Fairy had come!

We raced downstairs
and... again!
Oh no!
We had missed her!
Apparently by just a few seconds.

But she had left behind a tree,
a brightly lit tree,
shining with real candles
beeswax candles that smelled wonderful.
The tree was covered with beautiful stars and ornaments,
and under the tree were the gifts.

Because German children do not get their gifts from Santa.
It is the Christmas Fairy who brings them,
And as a child I knew exactly what she looked like,
I had a picture book,
and there she was
a girl maybe twelve years old
with blond curly hair
in a nightgown and bare feet.
And of course she could fly
and come into people's homes
and bring them Christmas trees and gifts.

Such was the mystery and the magic of Christmas when I was a child.
But now I am all grown up, grown old.
And I have long since discovered that
it was really my parents all along
who secretly bought and decorated the tree.

It was very clever of them to make us eat dinner upstairs with Grandma,
so that they could get everything ready and surprise us,
and make our Christmas so magic and mysterious.

For thousands of years the mystery and the magic of Christmas
has also involved the story of the virgin Mary
and how it was that she became the mother of Jesus.

But now Christianity is divided.
I have had Church members who told me that they no longer believe in the virgin birth.
And these members have always had my support and sympathy.
At the same time Christian fundamentalists are defending the doctrine of the virgin birth as a
literal truth.

But does it have to be either or?
Do enlightened Christians have to give up the mystery of Christmas?
Or do Christians who live in an age of space travel and smart phones have to believe
unbelievable truths for the sake of their faith?

Today I would like to introduce you to a new way of looking at Mary, a way which does not involve biology.

After all, we already do this in other regards, for example in the Roman tradition it is common to refer to the priest as “Father”.

But this does not require him to be biologically a father.

Likewise, nuns in a monastery have traditionally referred to their leader as “Mother”, Or “Mother Superior”.

And again this did not require their leader to be biologically a mother.

And it is not uncommon for believers to refer to each other as brothers and sisters, and yet, there is no biological relationship between them.

Now, how does this non-biological approach work for Mary?

Before I say more about that, I want you to consider what it was like to be a woman in Bible times.

In Bible times a woman did not have personal rights, or human rights as we now understand them.

A woman was a property.

And she belonged either to her father or her husband.

While she was a virgin she was the property of her father.

As a mother, she was the property of her husband.

But what about Mary who is called both, a virgin and a mother?

Whose property is she?

As the Bible story unfolds, we can see that her life is very unusual, because she belongs neither to her father nor to her husband.

Instead, she belongs to God and to herself.

Throughout the gospels we see her acting faithfully and we see her acting on her own.

Today’s gospel tells us how Joseph was instructed by the angel to take her as his wife.

But after the birth of Jesus there is hardly any mention of him.

At the wedding of Cana, there is mention of Mary, but not of Joseph.

At the crucifixion Mary stands under the cross, but not Joseph.
At the resurrection Mary is one of the witnesses, but not Joseph.
When the early church is born Mary is one of the leaders, but there is no mention of Joseph.
It looks like Mary belonged first of all to God and secondly to herself.

For 1st century women this was a radical new way of being in the world,
And I would say even to this day it is quite radical for anyone to think of themselves
that they belong first of all to God
and secondly to themselves.

Women's rights and human rights have come a long way,
especially in America,
other countries, yes, still have some catching up to do,
But here in America women are no longer considered property.

And yet, as a woman I have to say, that I often feel that my life is not my own.
And I am sure many women as well as men might say the same.
We have obligations to our loved ones and to our employers and even to neighbors and friends.

And yet, I believe that God's intention for all of us is to grow into a life
which is oriented more towards God
and less constrained by the obligations of our circumstances.

How can such a life be possible?
Again, I think the story of Mary is informative here.
Mary did not seek her own path. It was a gift.
An unexpected and mysterious gift
which, in my mind, puts the mystery back into Christmas.

But Mary was not a passive recipient of this gift.
She accepted it, perhaps at first with shock, but later with great joy.

And this same unexpected and mysterious gift
is also a gift God gives to each one of us.
It is the gift of new life.

Sometimes this new life unfolds gradually,
And sometimes it can come quite sudden,

when the circumstances of our lives change,
in the blinking of an eye.
Perhaps we fall in love,
perhaps we lose a job,
perhaps a new opportunity presents itself,
perhaps we are forced to relocate,
or embrace a new chapter in our life story.

My mother, for example became a widow 10 years ago.
It was a very painful adjustment for,
but over time I also watched her come into her own,
and discover skills and talents she didn't know she had.
she was forced to make independent decisions,
and at first she was frightened, but slowly she became proud of her accomplishments.

Even more surprising is the story of people
who leave a secure job to follow their heart,
because they have a dream which just doesn't go away.

And for others the new life might come when they least expect it.
And it is at first perhaps not welcome or convenient.
It may perhaps even be embarrassing,
as Mary's motherhood might have been embarrassing to her.

And so our task then is to live with faith and courage
and to say yes to the new thing that God is doing in our life
and to believe that it comes from God even if friends and neighbors shake their head.

Because there is still magic and mystery,
not just on Christmas, but all through the year.
Lives are being transformed every day,
because God still has dreams for the world
and God plants these dreams into our hearts
and ask us to say yes and give birth.

Amen.