The Myth of Mary
Rock Spring Congregational United Church of Christ
Rev. Dr. Kathryn Nystrand Dwyer
Third Sunday of Advent
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Luke 1:26-38

6 In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, 27 to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin’s name was Mary. 28 And he came to her and said, “Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.” 29 But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. 30 The angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. 31 And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. 32 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. 33 He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.” 34 Mary said to the angel, “How can this be, since I am a virgin?” 35 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. 36 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. 37 For nothing will be impossible with God.” 38 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.

“How did this myth of Mary get started?” It was the question asked, with some not-so-subtle irritation, at the Bible study on Tuesday. I should have been prepared for this question. I can count on this class, and many Rock Springers, to challenge many texts of our scripture, especially the ones that are so central to the Christian story.

Another person said, “Look, I have never seen this before. It says ‘therefore the child to be born will be holy.’” She didn’t say it, but I could imagine someone getting mad at the thought that a holy person needed to have a miraculous birth. Obviously, that rules most of us out.

Brian McLaren writes, “Many of us today will suspect that Luke made up this story about Mary to echo Isaiah’s prophecy about a son being born to a virgin, just as he invented the story of Elizabeth conceiving in old age to echo the story of Sarah. It’s tempting to quickly assign both stories to the category of primitive, prescientific legend and be done with them. After all, both stories are, to scientific minds, simply impossible.’

‘But what if that is the point? What if their purpose is to challenge us to blur the line between what we think is possible and what we think is impossible?"
All good myths are intended to make truth visible. There are many truths in this story; this morning I want to offer just a few.

**1) EVERYTHING CHANGES WHEN WE KNOW WE ARE ENOUGH AND THAT WE ARE LOVED FOR WHO WE ARE.**

We know how the story begins. The angel Gabriel comes to Mary and says, “Greetings, favored one. The Lord is with you.” And what is her reaction? I love it: “She was much perplexed and wondered how this could be.” I like Mary because she is honest about her confusion.

What is so intriguing to me about this exchange is that it happens before she hears any news about being pregnant. All the angel Gabriel says is that God is with her and she is favored.

And so are we. If God is here with us, why can’t we see God? And if Mary, along with each of us, are favored and loved by God, why are we at times so full of self-doubt? We all struggle with feeling as though we are not enough for whatever life is handing us – a sick child, our own illness, a demanding job, racial strife in the street. Mary and Joseph could easily have felt as though they weren’t right for the job, but God says, “you are enough. You are more than enough. You are favored.”

Knowing we are loved for who we are can make all of the difference.

There is an article in the *New York Times*, first published in December 2010, about a nursing facility called Beatitudes that is exploring new approaches with Alzheimer’s patients.

The article describes how Ms. Nance, 96, is able to sleep, be bathed and dine whenever she wants, even at 2 a.m. She can eat anything, no matter how unhealthy, including unlimited chocolate.

And she was given a baby doll, a move that seemed so jarring that a supervisor initially objected until she saw how calm Ms. Nance became when she rocked, caressed, and fed her “baby,” often agreeing to eat herself after the doll “ate” several spoonfuls.

Dementia patients at Beatitudes are allowed practically anything that brings comfort, even a “nip at night” of alcohol.

To determine how to relate to a patient, the caregivers plumb the patient’s history so that they know as much as possible about what they loved to do and their preferences.
On the day the reporter for this story was there, Ms. Nance was in her wheelchair. She happily held her baby doll, which she named Benjamin, and commented about raising her sons decades ago.

Some caregivers had at first considered the doll an “undignified” and demeaning security blanket. But Ms. Gallagher explained that “for a lot of people who are parents, what gives them joy is caring for children.”

“I was able,” Ms. Gallagher said, “to find Margaret’s strength.”

Ms. Gallagher said she learned when approaching Ms. Nance to “look at her baby doll, and once I connect with the doll, I could look at her.”

She squatted down, complimented Benjamin’s shoes, and said, “You’re the best mom I know.”

Ms. Nance nodded earnestly. “It’s good to know,” Ms. Nance said, “that somebody knows that you care.”

EVERYTHING CHANGES WHEN WE KNOW WE ARE ENOUGH AND THAT WE ARE LOVED FOR WHO WE ARE.

“Greetings favored one. God is with you.” It is the beginning of the story and at the heart of Christmas. You are enough. You are loved exactly how you are. If we get that, it changes everything.

2) KINDNESS OVER VIOLENCE

The leaders of the ancient empires typically presented themselves as divine-human hybrids with superpowers. Pharaohs and Caesers were “sons of Gods,” and they were infused with violent powers. The story of Jesus coming into the world is entirely different. As McLaren writes, *The doctrine of virgin birth, it turns out, isn’t about bypassing sex but about subverting violence. The violent power of top-down patriarchy is subverted not by counter-violence but by the creative power of pregnancy. It is through what proud men have considered “the weaker sex” that God’s true power enters and changes the world.*

Mary cooperates with that creative power and Jesus, at every turn, models her receptivity to God and consistently prefers “the insightful kindness of motherhood to the violent blindness of statehood.”

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3) NOTHING IS IMPOSSIBLE WITH GOD

Fred Craddock says that this is the creed we should recite every week. Nothing is impossible with God. When we are in the midst of something that feels impossible, we need to recite these words until we believe them or, at least, until we have the courage to put one foot in front of another.

Thousands of black, white, Latino, Asian, young and elderly people marched in protest yesterday here in DC, in NY, and in other parts of the country. Perhaps there is no one who has a vision of how this racial tension will end, but as with everything that seems impossible at the onset, we have to take the first step.

As a woman named Shannon in New York told CBS yesterday,

"I don't know what's the next step. That's why I'm taking this one ..I know that my voice being heard is one step that I can take."

Nelson Mandela said, “It always seems impossible until it is done.”

We look to people like Nelson Mandela, Mother Theresa, Martin Luther King, and Dorothy Day as people who embody this willingness to put one foot in front of the other. These people have become larger than life in the doing the impossible category. And yet, we don’t have to look that far back in history:

- The person who gives up a Saturday morning just a couple of weeks before Christmas to march for justice.
- A husband who daily bathes his wife, gives her medication, and reminds her of her children
- The teacher who gets up every morning and listens to her students, encourages her students, and helps them discover their own gifts
- Anyone, who has been let down and betrayed, who opens their heart to love again

These are the people who embody what Elizabeth Barrette call Origami Emotion:

*Hope is*  
*Folding paper cranes*  
*Even when your hands get cramped*  
*And your eyes tired,*  
*Working past blisters and*  
*Paper cuts,*  
*Simply because something in you*  
*Insists on*  
*Openings its wings.*
You are enough and you have something to offer...

Kindness is the greatest power...

Nothing is impossible with God...

These are the truths in the myth of Mary and in the message of Advent.

Amen