

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Barbara R. Cunningham, associate minister at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Advent IV, December 20, 2009, dedicated to the glory of God!

“Unexpected and Mysterious”

Luke 1:39-45

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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Read the words of the Hymn of the Day – Unexpected and Mysterious. Elizabeth – six months pregnant. Mary – newly pregnant! Giving birth, the whole experience is somewhat a mystery – even when we have knowledge of how it happens.

I think of the differences in the story of the mysterious pregnancy of Mary and of our day when we can take pictures of, and even do surgery, the fetus in-utero. We cannot just honor Jesus in our way, but we learn of the culture in which he lived. I’m sure we hear only the beauty of the story – but imagine Mary – a young woman in a country that stoned unmarried women for even being raped. The standards for their lives were so different than our freedom. We can’t compare that time to ours, but we can take from this story the excitement Mary felt – the joy of Elizabeth, the gifts of God they had been given.

Think of the beauty of the babies being born here in our church – their pure hearts and spirits, the beautiful little faces. They are gifts of God to these parents – mysterious and unexpected life is on the way. Mary was open to the angel telling her of this

child and his mission, and believed Jesus to be human and divine. What a responsibility to carry this child!

Each year we hear this story. Do we take time to think about what Mary did, how she felt? I don't think we do, but we certainly have traditions in each culture that we carry out because of the birth she went through and the life she gave Jesus as he was growing up. Would we listen to an angel or would we believe we were seeing things – maybe had too much to drink? Mary listened and she sang. And she gave birth, and we still celebrate that birth 2000 plus years later. There is still something unexpected and mysterious about it.

It seems to me that at times in our celebrations we get way too busy. I know that was not the message trying to be given to us. We get caught up in the commercial Christmas, seeking to give those we love just the right gift. Yet there is so much more to gift giving to celebrate the birth of one who brought us peace and love – those gifts that come from the inside, from the love and peace we can now pass on.

Don't get me wrong. I believe gifts are wonderful and when we give these gifts from our love, based on the love Christ came to teach us about, they can be life changing.

I hate shopping, except for the funny things that happen when I “people watch.” One day, as I was sitting in an old building I saw a woman going through a revolving door. There was a man behind her and I assumed he was her husband as she waited for him. He didn't make it through the door the first time and kept going around and around. As his look became panicked, I heard his wife say, “Just stop,” and when he did, the door allowed him to get out.

Advent and Christmas become a lot like that: our senses get overloaded and it feels like we are in a revolving door. To get out, to slow down, is the goal. To celebrate and enjoy, rather than being so stressed. Singing the old Christmas songs can bring great comfort. We put up Christmas decorations, give a beauty on the buildings and trees, and as we look at the outside, it looks beautiful.

We need to look deeper. Have you ever taken a picture like the one in the *Dispatch* a few years ago that looks one way at first glance and when you stare at it for awhile it becomes a different picture – a vision within a vision. One of the pictures I saw were two stiff figures with their arms straight out, and the title was Mall Zombies. Like life, we don't see all until we look deeply into the picture – into the heart and soul of another person and ourselves.

Mary pondered the words of the angel in her heart. Ponder means “to consider or examine attentively or deliberately; to think deeply.” To ponder in our hearts is to find new meaning – and we can't just do the same old thing. The good news is that our yearnings are being met in the advent of a God who hears, who cares, who comes among us as human and divine. In the darkness of the fourth Sunday of Advent, suddenly there is an announcement of light. So is our plan every year that God will come and change the world? Not so. God comes to be WITH us, not to do it for us. As we sing *Joy to the World*, we recognize that not everyone is experiencing joy. Plans have been altered by events in our lives, just like Mary, who trusted the message of the angel and carried out the raising of the child of God.

One of the great problems of today is that we have far too many plans and not nearly enough dreams. Have we lost our ability to dream? I don't think so – just our willingness to risk the new. We expect that when we put up the same decorations, sing the same songs, hear the same message, send the same card and give gifts, feed the poor and house the homeless, that meaning in our lives will be there – God will take over out of gratefulness to us for doing such good work.

Now I'm going to meddle a little: what if you are holding a grudge in your heart? What if you have thought only of yourself or your own loved ones and no one else? What if you have hurt someone? PONDER THESE THINGS IN YOUR HEARTS! To find something new, to find deeper meaning, to give birth, we often have to go through pain and anguish. Wow, is that ever hard. We may have to set aside old plans and traditions to let in a new spirit.

God didn't tell us we would not have to face pain. God said, "I will be with you," through your anguish. What we want is to rise above the hurt of the world, but we cannot, so we search for comfort in the promise of new life by the birth of the Christ child. We can't just stop at the birth. We look on to the life Christ lived. Ponder these things in your heart.

A 7-year-old boy had a birthday and got a giggling Elmo, which was a rare find. He heard about a little boy, sick with cancer, and he gave his Elmo to the sick child, saying, "He needs a little laughter in his life." One person doing a wonderful thing makes my world a better place. A small town in rural America went broke, so they gathered together and bought a lottery ticket. They won the lottery and used the money to build on the ruins of their town. If we can each build on the ruins of our lives, we can make room for God's spirit to move in – dreams to abound.

I was once invited to a party where I knew no one and we were asked to bring a gift. The gift, however, was forbidden to be anything materialistic. We all thought about what we might bring – cookies? No that would take buying the material to make. Knit a sweater? No that would take yarn. I realized I could tell a story. We all gathered around a cozy room near a fire and shared our gifts. One person led us in *Silent Night*, another danced as a ballerina. I shared my story and the simplistic way of gifting was in itself a gift to me.

Meaning comes not from plans but from being open to the God who is with us in all the events of our lives. We don't escape the pain, we live the joy. Miracles happen when we let go of the control and look deeply into the hearts of others, and ourselves, no matter what our circumstances, live fully each moment. If we could live more like children on the old rope swing on the oak tree, pumping ourselves higher and higher until we see a new terrain that expands before our eyes.

We receive the unexpected, the miraculous gift Mary gave in the birth of her child. I believe the birth of Jesus was wonderful

and is well worth celebrating, but not because it was a miraculous virgin birth nor because angels appeared to shepherds, nor because magi came bearing gifts. I believe the birth of Jesus was wonderful because of the way the spirit worked miraculously through him in word and deed. Amen.

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