

*A sermon delivered by the Rev. Barbara R. Cunningham,
minister for pastoral care at the First Congregational Church,
United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, December 21, 2008,
dedicated to the glory of God!*

“Mary of Nazareth”

Luke, 1:26-38

***(Part IV of V in the
Advent/Christmas Sermon
Series:***

***“Places on the Journey to
Bethlehem”***

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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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Daily life in Nazareth was simple. It was a small town filled with persons who were poor, and seen by many as a slum-like village. Mary, in her daily rounds, fetched water, tended the fires, ground grain, made porridge of wheat or barley. They had cucumbers, and watered down wine – the universal drink. The only time they ate meat was on feast days. They sat around a common bowl and dipped their right hands into it for food. With the darkness, they unrolled mats, and huddled near the fire. Jesus’ house was a one room, mud-brick house, roofed with mud covered reed mats. It looked a lot like Arab village houses today.

Today in the center of a great modern city, a rustic crèche is placed. It is our symbol of relating the gospel to the needs of this world. Christmas says: “Life keeps coming on, keeps seeking to fulfill itself, keeps affirming the possibility of hope.” Christmas means one more thing to try when all else has failed, the upward reach of life. It is the incentive to carry on.

How appropriate it is to be at a crossroads in our lives. Some are struggling to survive, some are cutting back to make Christmas more meaningful. Some are being exposed for their extreme greed and maybe some of us are recognizing our simple greed.

Each year, a few weeks before Christmas, members of Old First Reformed Church in Philadelphia put up a large stable, a display of the manger scene featuring life-size mannequins and live animals. People come from far and wide to see the life-like, beautiful sight.

On Christmas Eve, the mannequins are replaced by real people – members of Old First Church – and the drama is once again portrayed. And in California, at Garden Grove (a city seen by Californians a little like Nazareth), at the Crystal Cathedral in their all glass sanctuary, a pageant with live animals and people draws thousands every year.

The custom of the Christmas creche goes back to the year 1223 when Francis of Assisi set up the first creche at the grotto of Greccio in Italy. He wanted to make the humanity of Jesus more real to the people of his day. He prayed and had Mass over the baby. The living Christmas creche has all the appeal and all the risk of real life portrayed.

Knowledge of Jesus’ birth is rather uncertain. The biblical accounts do not even agree. No eyewitness reporters were at the birth. But how the story *really* happened is not as important as how the message touches us today. Everyone is

attracted by the simple story. The whole world comes to the creche in each city:

* Sometimes a whole class of pre-schoolers walks to the stable with their teachers;

* Parents and their families come – some older children like to feed the animals;

* Visitors from all nations and races and faith are brought by their Christian friends and hear the story for the first time.

As we look back, I wonder what Mary must have felt on that night when the angel comes to her and tells her that she is to bear a child whose name will be called Jesus, who will be a child of the most-high God, and then tells her not to be afraid. How will she face Joseph, to whom she is engaged? How will her parents react? What will the neighbors say?

When a child is born to an unwed mother, it can be a devastating experience, even in our day. Mary most certainly did what most of us would do. She asked questions. One of our members wrote a wonderful poem about Mary.

why me?
why now?
why this?
I'm just a girl,
about to be married.
they'll never understand.

why me?
why now?
why this?
Am I the first or last you asked?
I have no room,
but I'll do what I can.

why me?
why now?
why this?
I have a job do to.

it's dark and cold and I need to rest.
a star? is that your plan?
why me?
why now?
why this?
I am counsel to kings.
visionary, reader, mystic,
man.

why me?
why now?
why this?
who am I to You?
vessel
witness
follower
protector
sojourner
believer
giver
receiver

how do You find me, wherever I am?
how do you bring me here?

Eventually, Mary chooses to believe what the angel told her. I imagine it took time, as any shocking news would. She says, "With God, nothing is impossible." Mary makes a journey of trust – from disbelief and dismay to acceptance, even affirmation. Mary is able to trust God. She is able to face the way things *are* in her life rather than the way she would like them to be. She is able to accept the unacceptable.

And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for you O God, have looked with favor on the lowliness of your servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for you O Mighty One, have done great things for me and holy is your name."

Are we able to trust in the same way? To really trust is to refrain from having to know all the answers ahead of time, or to know why, or having to control all that happens to us. To trust means to let go and leave room so that God can work a new thing in and through us. Trusting means to know that what we do for others has meaning even if our words don't tell the whole story.

There was a woman who had a wonderful, funny, caring neighbor named Ed. Ed developed terminal cancer and as he gradually weakened, his wife became the sole breadwinner. Knowing how difficult just the daily routine was, she began cooking dinner for them one night a week. She and Ed shared a love for Jell-o, and each week she would try out a new variation. Since her family didn't really care for Jell-o, this was a special treat for her as well.

Every Wednesday night at 6 p.m. she'd take over their dinner, and every Wednesday at 7 p.m. she'd receive a call from Ed thanking her. Sadly, this ritual lasted only a few months; Ed died at Thanksgiving. She had put that time out of her mind until about a year later. She was making jelly and all those times with Ed came flooding back. Shortly before he died, Ed had written her a beautiful note, thanking her for what she'd been doing. **She wished she'd thanked him for the weekly gift he gave her. Through those times with Ed, she truly learned that you cannot give kindness without spreading some of it on yourself.**

Mary accepted the gift of God, and gave us the greatest gift – our example for life. She stood by the human Jesus as he lived on earth. We celebrate that gift over and over as we relive the Christmas story.

What does the Christmas story mean to you?

Perhaps we ask the question a holy man called a “seeker” asked of God: “Past the seeker as he prayed came the crippled and the beggar and the beaten. And seeing them, the holy one

(the seeker), went down into deep prayer and cried, ‘Great God, how is it that a loving creator can see such things and yet do nothing about them?’ And out of the long silence, God said, ‘I did something. **I made you!**’ ” (a Sufi teaching story)

What does the celebration of Christmas mean to you?

Are you able, like Mary, to accept what you cannot control, to live today with an openness to giving of your gifts to others? The greatest gifts we can give to another is the simple gift of ourself – our own story, our own faith journey and our love without question.

We honor the story today of one woman who shared her life with us by giving birth to the child of God. We have been given the gift of what life is to mean if we but follow Mary with a trusting God, and Jesus the Christ with a pattern for life. Are you willing to enter into this commitment with new energy and love? Amen.

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