

# “How Can this Be?”

Luke 1:26-38

*Fourth of Six in the sermon series: “How Does a Weary World Rejoice?”*

The Rev. Joanna Samuelson  
Designated Minister

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From the Pulpit of  
The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ  
444 East Broad Street, Columbus, OH 43215  
Phone: 614.228.1741 Fax: 614.461.1741  
Email: [home@first-church.org](mailto:home@first-church.org)  
Website: <http://www.first-church.org>

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*Let us pray: O Holy One, we pray that You would bless us through Your Word for us this day. And may the words that I have to offer, here this morning, please You and honor You and glorify Your holy name. In Jesus’ name, amen.*

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As you all probably know by now, our Advent/Christmas sermon series theme this year has been: *How Does a Weary World Rejoice?*

And each week, as you may have noticed, our sermon titles have been in the form of a question. And so, my sermon title today comes directly from our Gospel reading from Luke 1: *How Can This Be?*

This question format – of this sermon series – prompts me to ask **you**:

What are some of the questions that **YOU** are holding in your heart at this time? Those kinds of questions that are of *great* import in your life?

Now, I’m not talking about questions regarding:

- *whether or not you should renew your gym membership;*
- *or if you should start a new book club in your neighborhood;*
- *or what color to paint the kitchen ... whether you select soft cream or stormy gray? (apparently two of the most popular paint colors these days!)*
- *OR whether to invite your friends over to watch the Ohio State-Missouri football game this coming Friday at 8:00 pm!*

Now, of course, all of **those** kinds of questions are the substance of our everyday lives – and routines and relationships. And *how* we live out these types of questions certainly brings deep meaning and shape **to** our lives!

But rather, I'm talking about those formative questions that shape who we are as a person. Questions like:

- *In what ways am I – or am I not – living out my faith and my core values?*
- *What would I do differently if I weren't so scared?*
- *What haven't I taken the time to learn about yet?*
- *And who do I need to forgive? And for what must I forgive myself?*

Our Gospel reading from **Luke 1** this morning is one of the most familiar stories in the New Testament. It is that well-known interaction and dialogue between the angel Gabriel and Mary – when God sent Gabriel to visit young Mary to inform her that she would “*conceive in her womb and bear a son whom she would then name Jesus.*”

Now, this exchange between Mary and Gabriel is certainly one of the most notable – and profound and memorable – and life-changing and world-changing conversations that has *ever* taken place!

And **how** Mary responded to this news is just. as. significant!

Mary's words, here, that we often recall are from Luke 1:28 where she says, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.”

However, *before* Mary was able to offer her consent and commitment and covenant in that way, she **first** raised a question – a **critical** question – back in verse 34 – when she addressed the angel directly and asked, “How can this be, since I am a virgin?”

*How can this be?*

*How can this be?*

This year, as I approach the manger, I am hearing Mary's response to the angel Gabriel *quite differently* than ever before.

I am drawn not just to Mary's specific question but to the depth of who she was as a young woman and as a **person of faith and** as a *critical thinker ... and* as someone of depth and breadth – who was authentic and curious and open to learning and growth as expressed through her question, “*How can this be?*”

Seeing and understanding Mary in this light – is in sharp contrast to the traditional and common depiction of her throughout our society: as someone who was meek and mild and submissive as taught in so many other Christian traditions.

Rather, here, in this foundational story of our faith tradition, we encounter a Mary who has agency – *and* is a creative partner *with* God – in not only birthing but also in nurturing and teaching and raising the Christ child – who would – generations later – be forever known as our Sovereign and our Savior!

It was probably about 15 years ago – when I was first introduced to an Adult Christian Education curriculum called “Living the Questions” – and I'm pretty sure that this curriculum has been used, here, at First Church, at some point, as well.

Living the Questions is a refreshing and affirming approach to Bible study and conversations about faithful living.

It is a curriculum that features contemporary and progressive theologians such as Renita Weems and James Forbes and Diana Butler Bass and Walter Brueggemann and numerous others.

*And* it's a curriculum that presents a sharp contrast to so many other Christian traditions in which a literal and doctrinal and certitudinal approach is taken in interpreting Scripture.

But through a pedagogical approach like Living the Questions, questions and doubts and uncertainties about faith are acknowledged and affirmed – and even recognized as guideposts along the way of our own personal journeys of faith formation and spiritual growth.

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**Today** is an unusual Sunday in the liturgical calendar – because **this** year – the fourth Sunday of Advent happens to fall on Christmas Eve. (This happens every six or seven years and is also affected by leap years as well.)

So, this morning, our focus is on our Advent readings and liturgy, but in just a few hours from now, in time for our 3:00 service this afternoon, we will switch gears to the nativity stories and hymns of Christmas Eve.

However, I cannot think of a more appropriate and meaningful segue from Advent to the Christmas season – than the wisdom and curiosity of young Mary, pointing us in the direction of the manger – in a spirit of wonder and awe and amazement, and saying: *How can this be? How can this be?*

In the lectionary that we follow – the Revised Common Lectionary – we are given what are referred to as parallel readings each week throughout the liturgical season after Pentecost that are sometimes offered as alternate readings.

And so, it seems only fitting that we close this morning with the alternate Gospel text for today from Luke 1:46-55.

It is the well-known Magnificat of Mary (also known as the Song of Mary).

They are the prophetic words that spontaneously flowed from Mary's heart after having been blessed by her much older cousin Elizabeth (who, as you'll recall, was also pregnant at that time with John the Baptist). **And** – they are still words for all of us today!

Mary's words, that I'll share here, are certainly not meek and mild as she is often depicted. Rather, they are humble words, yet powerful words, and even revolutionary words, as Mary imagines that another world is possible:

*My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my savior,  
for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.*

*Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;  
for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name.*

*His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.*

*He has shown strength with his arm;*

*he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.*

*He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly;  
he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.*

*He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy,*

*according to the promise he made to our ancestors,*

*to Abraham and to his descendants forever.*

Thanks be to God, amen!

