

Sermon for Sunday, December 20, 2015
St James Episcopal Church, St James NY
The Very Rev. Canon Dr. Raewynne J. Whiteley

Finally
it's almost here
that day that we all wait for,
the celebration of the birth of the Messiah,
otherwise known
as Christmas.

I still remember as a child
the excitement and joy
that Christmas brought,
the magic of Christmas carols,
the glory of the Christmas tree,
and the empty pillowcase at the foot of my bed - because in Australia
Santa delivers presents to your pillowcase rather than your stocking -
all of those things
were part of the anticipation
that characterized
the Christmas holiday.

But as we grow up
Christmas becomes more complicated for many of us.
That anticipation
becomes mixed with other emotions.
We wonder whether we can afford
the gifts we would like to buy.
We think about the people
who should be
around the table
but will be missing,
whether through death,
or estrangement,
or simply
distance.
And this year,
the presidential race
has combined with terrorist attacks

to create
an underlying
climate of fear.
And Christmas, perhaps,
doesn't feel
quite so much
like Christmas.

And as I read our gospel for today
it struck me
that perhaps that's
how Mary felt.

Some of it
was probably simply
the sorts of things
that all expectant mothers feel,
especially those
expecting their first child.
Anticipation,
and excitement,
waiting for the coming of this new life.
But the excitement also threaded through
with anxiety.
Will we make it through
the first trimester?
Will my baby be healthy and whole?
What will labor be like?
And how will we survive the loss of income?

All that
Mary shares
with all mothers.
But then, for Mary,
there's a whole other layer of complication.

Because she
isn't just any mother.
To begin with,
she's just a girl.

Probably only 12 or 13 years old, just starting middle school
if she lived in our time and place,
but in her time and place
preparing to be married
probably
to an older man.

Probably not particularly well educated,
living in a country under foreign occupation.

But the wedding preparations
are going just fine,
all until the day
when an angel shows up
and told her
that she was to have a child.

“What?” she says. “It’s not possible. No way.”

But the angel
is persistent, and, as one of my preaching students said yesterday,
“Way”.

This would happen,
whether Mary thought
it was possible or not.
And her response,
“Okay then.” Or, as Luke puts it a little more elegantly,
‘Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.’

And there she is
by the time of our reading today,
a pregnant teenager, and she goes to visit her much older cousin Elizabeth, who is also
pregnant.

Goes,
or perhaps was sent.
It’s entirely possible
that the trip to her cousin’s
was not so much
Mary’s choice,
as something that her mother arranged
to avoid scandal
in her hometown.

“She’s gone to visit our cousin Elizabeth;
you remember Elizabeth, the one who is unexpectedly
expecting. She needs a little help around her home
and we thought it would be good experience for Mary. She’ll be down there a while,
probably nine months or so.”

And you can imagine Mary
going with some trepidation.
What will her cousin say?
Will she welcome her,
and help her through this new thing
of growing a baby?
Or will she castigate her
for getting marriage and pregnancy
the wrong way round,
tell her how stupid she’s been
a child bearing a child.

And then she arrives
and Elizabeth greets her with open arms.
Because when she hears Mary’s voice,
the child she, Elizabeth, is carrying
kicks hard,
and Elizabeth realises
that this is no ordinary
pregnant teenager.

“Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this
happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the
sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leapt for joy. And blessed is she who
believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.”

And suddenly
all the anticipation
and excitement
and loneliness
and anxiety
and joy
and shame
and everything else

begin to spill out,
 spill out
 in those wonderful words
 that we know
 as the Magnificat,
 the song
 of Mary.

“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 for ever.”

Mary's world
 has been turned upside down
 by the visit of the angel
 and she sings,
 sings in the tradition of the other women singers of Scripture,
 Miriam
 and Deborah
 and Hannah.
 Singing of a world
 where God will work
 in the most unexpected ways,
 where the oppressors
 will not oppress forever,

and where the least important person
becomes the key to the whole story.
Singing hope
even when
she is scared silly.

Yesterday
at the Cathedral in Garden City
we celebrated the life
of Jae Chung,
assistant priest
at St Ann's, Sayville.
It is less than three weeks ago
that he was told
that he had advanced liver cancer,
less than three weeks
that he had to absorb the news
and prepare himself and his family -
he was married, with four little children -
less than three weeks
to prepare
to die.

And our bishop told us
of visiting him last week,
and of how Jae had spoken
of preparing to sing the Nunc Dimittis,
the words that Simeon sang
as he took the baby Jesus in his arms at the temple,
"Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace,
according to your word;
for my eyes have seen your salvation,
which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,
a light for revelation to the Gentiles
and for glory to your people Israel."

Jae was preparing to sing those words,
to sing them in church
or to sing them
in heaven.

It reminds me
of a story about my nephew Lockey.
Not long before he died
he said to my brother
'I know what we should do - why don't we write what we are all feeling in the book?'
The only book my brother could think of
was the one he had been reading to him - Sam Silver, Undercover Pirate, and the Treasure
Map.
But Lockey had another book in mind.
'Daddy,' he said, 'you write, and I will sing.'
And so they did. John wrote
and Lockey sang.
About star wars,
and about what he was feeling,
and about love.

Today
we sing along with Mary.
We sing
in a world
where our Christmas anticipation
is tinged with fear
about whether we will every be safe.
We sing
in a world
where our Christmas anticipation
is tinged with grief
for the ones who will not be around our table this year.
We sing
in a world
where our Christmas anticipation
is tinged with anxiety
about what the future will hold.
But still we sing.
We sing along
with Mary, singing
of a world turned
upside down,
a world where hope

triumphs over fear,
light
over darkness,
life over death.
We sing
of the one
who has done great things for us;
holy is his name.