

“God’s Love Shall Reign”  
December 18, 2011  
Scripture: Psalm 89:1-4; Luke 1:26-38

Every year we revisit this story at some point in our journey through Advent. And most of the time my inclination is to focus on Mary. She’s a fascinating character in the gospels. We only know a few things about her, really. We can assume, for instance, that she was very young, by our standards, to be chosen for this role. Some scholars think she may have been as young as 13 or 14. Typically, in those days a woman would have started a family sometime between the ages of 14 and 20. We know she was betrothed, or engaged, but not married and so was not living with her husband-to-be, Joseph.

But that’s about the extent of what we can say about her. All the rest is conjecture and imagination. One little hint about her sophistication can be found in John’s Gospel of all places. When the future disciple Nathanael is told about Jesus being from Nazareth his response is, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” So Nazareth may have been considered a sort of backwater place, not the place from where you’d expect anyone of significance. And if that’s true, then Mary was probably a peasant of very meager circumstances. We may tend to imagine Mary, Joseph and Jesus to be sort of middle-class but in fact it seems they were probably much poorer than that. In those days the only reason a person would take up a trade like carpentry was because they had no land of their own. A landless peasant barely had the means to survive so we’re not given a picture of folks living comfortably.

And all of that, Mary’s youth and ordinariness, Joseph’s poverty, all of it raises the question of why them. You see, there were other stories about miraculous conceptions in that culture. Alexander the Great was said to have been conceived by a lightning bolt from Jupiter the night before his parents were married. And of course in the Roman Empire one of Caesar’s titles was “son of god.” Stories like this one in Luke’s Gospel were reserved for people of power, for people who were obviously exceptional. The logic behind that is pretty clear, I think. How else could someone so great be born?

But Jesus was not obviously exceptional. In fact to the casual observer, objectively speaking, Jesus was sort of a loser. I don’t say that to shock you, but just put yourself in the shoes of someone watching Jesus’ life compared to someone like Caesar. By every measure the world considers important Jesus is a nobody compared to Caesar. I’m quite sure the news of his crucifixion was buried beneath mounds of reports from the provinces that landed on Caesar’s desk that week.

But rather than finding that disheartening, I’m convinced that’s the real good news we celebrate this season. Unfortunately we have reduced this story about Jesus’ conception and birth to an article of doctrine. In fact, that’s what we’ll be saying today when we recite the Apostles’ Creed: “...conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the virgin Mary...” We do an injustice to that claim both when we wink at it and when we insist on its uncritical acceptance because this claim is telling us something essential about who God is and about what God is up to through Jesus.

Entering the world in this way, through someone impoverished and powerless, leaves no room for attributing God's action to anything but love. God isn't choosing the most powerful, the one most likely to be successful and obtain victory. So it's clear that the choice of Mary has very little to do with her character or abilities. Her willingness to be used in this way guarantees nothing about the outcome. God alone is responsible for that.

In his book *Parables of the Kingdom*, Robert Capon describes two ways of expressing power in the world. The first is the way we're most familiar with, it's what Capon calls the "right-handed" use of power. It's the power that ensures obedience through force. We see it being used all the time from drones bombing targets in Afghanistan to police clearing out protesters on Wall Street. It's the oldest form of power in the world and probably the most efficient. One of its many draw-backs though is how it can give the impression that those who use it are somehow given divine authority – they're not just doing the work of the state, they're doing the work of God. Another of Caesar's titles in Jesus' day was "pontifex maximus," high priest of the Empire.

The alternative use of power Capon describes is what he calls "left-handed" power. Left-handed power is expressed through nonviolence. Mahatma Gandhi used left-handed power to shame the British into liberating India. It was at work on the Edmond Pettus Bridge outside Selma, AL in 1965 when civil rights activists met the violent onslaught of a police barricade with nonviolent resistance. Left-handed power is rooted in love rather than fear, it seeks to persuade rather than coerce. God enters the world in a display of left-handed power. Mary isn't forced to carry this child, she chooses to respond, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord."

Mary responds to God's love and the nature of power in her world is changed forever. That's the good news we're celebrating: God's love reigns and not Caesar's intimidation. That's a message we need to hear over and over in a world where it seems only those with the most influence and access to the most resources have any voice. The way of God is to lift up the lowly, as Mary would say, and to send the rich away empty.

When we remember who it is God chooses to favor and align ourselves with that choice we allow God's love to reign in our lives as well. And in doing that we become vessels of Christ's birth in the world. For Jesus is born anew again and again through those who invite God's love to rule in their lives, through those who meet the world's right-handed power of fear with God's left-handed power of love. As the Christian mystic Meister Eckhart once said, "We are all meant to be mothers of God, for God is always needing to be born."

So I invite you, as we approach Christmas this week to seek ways to allow God to be born in you. Let God's love reign through your actions in a world longing for love and compassion and justice. This is why God comes into the world: to reveal a love that overwhelms every fear and can lead us all into lives of justice and peace when we respond with Mary, "Let it be with me according to your word."

Amen