

**4 Advent
December 24, 2017**

**In the name of the God of all creation,
The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus,
And the power of God known in the Spirit.
Amen.**

This morning is about something being born in those places in our lives that are on the one hand virgin territory ... places in our psyches and souls where nothing has lived before, and, on the other hand, those places that have been barren for too many years.

This reading we just heard is the story of the Annunciation from Luke's gospel ... the visit of the angel Gabriel to Mary announcing that she will be the mother of Jesus. It is a familiar story that begins, "In the sixth month ..." but what does that mean? The sixth month of what? The answer, of course, is the sixth month of her kinswoman, Elizabeth's, pregnancy. But why use this as a reference point to the story about the angel Gabriel coming to Mary and telling her that she will be the mother of Jesus?

In the Hebrew Scriptures there is a literary device called *Midrash*. One form of *Midrash* tells a familiar story in another context with a different set of characters. An example of the concept of *Midrash* in today's world would be the musical *West Side Story* is a retelling of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* ... only in a different time setting ... a different social context ... and with different characters. Nevertheless, anyone familiar with *Romeo and Juliet* would soon know the ending of *West Side Story* without having to watch the whole play. And, for people of a certain age, another example is the play *My Fair Lady* which is a *Midrash* of Pygmalion of Greek mythology.

I also want to point out that this morning's reading is from the twenty-sixth verse of the first chapter of Luke's gospel. We don't often read the verses one through twenty-five, but the Gospel of Luke actually begins with a *Midrash* on the story of Abraham and Sarah. Before telling about the birth of Jesus, the author of Luke's gospel tells us about Zechariah and Elizabeth. They had wanted children but Elizabeth was barren. Zechariah was a Jewish priest who, from time-to-time, served at the Temple in Jerusalem. The story of Zechariah and Elizabeth takes up the first chapter of the Gospel of Luke, and it is in that context that we hear the words "In the sixth month ..."

As the story in Luke's gospel opens, Zechariah was serving in the Temple in Jerusalem and he was chosen by lot ... that is, he drew the short straw ... to enter the Holy of Holies on the one day of the year when a human being was allowed to go into this sacred space. In the First Temple ... the one destroyed by the Assyrians some 600 years before Zechariah ... the Holy of Holies was where the Ark of the Covenant resided. The Ark of the Covenant held the two tablets of the Ten Commandments. But the Ark had been lost ... either hidden by priests before the destruction of the Temple, or stolen by the

Assyrians, but in either case it had not been found ... in spite of Harrison Ford and the movie *Raiders of the Lost Ark*!

Anyhow, the Holy of Holies in the Temple was now an empty space except for an altar. However, it was the residence of God and therefore the most sacred of all spaces. Zechariah had been chosen to enter ... basically to do an annual housecleaning and offer incense to God. Now, while he was in the Holy of Holies, an angel appeared to Zechariah and told him that Elizabeth would bear a child who “will be great in the sight of the Lord,” and must never “drink wine or strong drink” because the spirit that will fill him will be the “Holy Spirit,” and this child will be like “Elijah,” but his name will be John. Hearing this, Zechariah had some questions ... maybe even doubts, “How can this be, since Elizabeth is getting on in years?” he asked the angel. At this the angel was somewhat insulted and replied that he was Gabriel ... the archangel Gabriel ... and since Zechariah had questioned this blessing he ... Zechariah ... would not be able to speak ... he would be made mute ... until after the baby was born.

After Zechariah’s time to serve in Jerusalem was over, he and Elizabeth returned to their home. In due time Elizabeth, in her old age, indeed did become pregnant as Gabriel had said. This is where we pick up the story this morning: “In the sixth month [of Elizabeth’s pregnancy] the angel Gabriel was sent [on another mission] to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man named Joseph.” And what follows is the rest of the story of the Annunciation ... the archangel Gabriel telling Mary that she will be the mother of Jesus.

This is *Midrash* with a twist. Everyone knows the story of Abraham and Sarah ... how Sarah was barren yet became pregnant in her old age and had a son name Isaac. Like Sarah, Elizabeth was barren and she, too, became pregnant in her old age. But then the story flips, and the archangel Gabriel comes to another childless woman, Mary. However, Mary is childless because she is young, not because she is too old. Like Zechariah, Mary asks Gabriel “How can this be?” Yet, instead of being struck mute, Mary is blessed, and in the end she responds “Here I am, the servant of the Lord. Let it be with me according to your word.”

When Elizabeth’s time comes John is born, and eight days later he was circumcised according to Jewish custom. Zechariah receives his voice back, and Chapter One ends with the statement “the child [John] grew and became strong in spirit and he was in the wilderness until the day he appeared publicly to Israel.”

It is Chapter Two ... the story of the birth of Jesus ... that we will hear this evening at our Christmas Eve service. That is the story of the census, and the traveling on a donkey, and the inn that had no room, and the baby being born in stable and laid in a manger, and the shepherds in the fields hearing angelic choirs, and the shepherds visiting the baby Jesus, and Mary pondering all these things in her heart.

In the 1990s and into the early 2000s I served as Rector of St. Mark's in Toledo, Ohio. We were known as a gay-friendly church at a time when they were few and far between. This was also a time when HIV/AIDS was taking a huge toll in the gay community. One Sunday a young man and a middle aged woman were in the congregation. Tam was the youngest of Lauren's seven children, and he was a gay man with AIDS. They became members of St. Mark's, and I ministered to both of them through his illness and his eventual death. Lauren had been Catholic but had found a home at St. Mark's when Tam was rejected by her priest, and Lauren remained at St. Mark's long after Tam's death. However, although Lauren was physically healthy, when Tam died she looked as if her life had been sucked out of her.

I heard from Lauren not long ago. She reflected upon that dark time, and shared with me just how depressed she had been. She wrote, "Those were my barren years ... I had brought seven living souls into this world, but when Tam died I had no life left in me. I felt like I had already gone to my grave ... I was just waiting to die." Later in her letter she said, "One day I woke up and looked at the sunrise. It was then that I knew there was still something alive in me and wanted to find a way to live it." In her younger years Lauren had been an artist, but had given it up to raise children. She said, "I always thought of myself as an artist, even during all those years of raising children ... and grieving Tam. Now I know I am an artist ... there was a new creative force alive in me."

Lauren's story is one of discovering a creative force in a barren landscape. It is a *Midrash* story ... a *Midrash* story like many that we have in our personal lives.

This is the Gospel ... this is the Good News. This part of the story is often overlooked, so I encourage you to take the time to read the story again. Read the whole story in Chapters One and Two of Luke's gospel. Go to a quiet place and read them slowly as if you were reading them for the first time. We sometimes take Bible stories like these ... the ones that are somewhat familiar ... we often take them for granted. So, read them again ... or, even better yet ... gather your family around and read the story to them.

Then ask yourself the question about what is birthing in you in those places that seemed barren and unproductive. What new life is coming alive in you that might point to an even greater life and intimacy with the divine spirit of God?

Those barren places might be those ideas and dreams and desires you had years ago ... the ones you tried to carry out, but something always got in the way, and then you abandoned them. Is it possible in your old age ... however old or young you may be ... that those dreams and desires and longings may still be wanting an expression?

And what about those places within you that are virgin territory ... those possibilities that have never been explored that just might bring you into a relationship with the divine in way that cannot be imagined.

Notice that both Zechariah and Mary were afraid in the presence of Gabriel ... an angel who resided in the presence of God. The potential for new life in barren places ... and virginal places ... can be a frightening possibility ... so frightening as to leave us speechless ... at least inarticulate about it.

Nevertheless, remember the reassurances that Gabriel gave both Zechariah and Mary ... God is looking upon you with God's favor ... even in your fear.

Believe it or not, our Christmas Eve celebration is just hours away ... the celebration of the birth of the baby Jesus. The church calls it the Feast of the Incarnation ... God coming alive in the world in the form of Jesus. All this Advent you have heard me preach that this is also the time when God can come alive in us ... alive in those barren places and ... and alive in those virginal places. It is as true for us, as it is true for Jesus.

Amen.