

God, With You

Scripture text: Luke 1:26-45

The Rev. Matthew McCaffrey

Center Church on the Green, December 20, 2020



Apart from, say, a “Mission: Impossible” movie, most of the stories we love to read and hear and watch start in a calm and engaging kind of way. We’re introduced to a character doing ordinary, everyday things...just like us...and we get a chance to settle into that character’s world.

Then, things happen.

It’s the most common kind of story arc. The writer starts with a situation, then complications ensue, and in the end those complications are resolved and life continues as we close the cover.

Each of us could come up with a story like that. A boy grows up playing baseball. He makes it to organized baseball, but he’s never good enough to play in the major leagues. He retires and becomes a baseball executive for a team that’s also never quite good enough to win a championship—until he starts relying on statistics to choose his players. As the story ends his team still doesn’t win championships but he and his players gain the respect of the league.

That's the story arc of *Moneyball*, which is about a sport I barely recognized this past summer. And it's a good, engaging arc at that.

We like stories like that because we want to know how people face adversity. A story that simply tells us that two people built a house and lived in it is nice, but not interesting. An interesting story would start with their hopes and dreams, tell us about all the trials and setbacks they faced, and end on their front porch as they sip lemonade and wonder aloud how they ever did all that.

It would be okay if a harmless piece of trim fell down and startled them, then evoking a little laughter from them as the story closed.

That would be an interesting story.

>>>

By that standard we have all been living a very interesting story this year. I know each of us has our everyday trials and challenges, and when we were living an everyday life we all faced differing challenges.

A year ago, we were looking forward to Christmas Eve and Christmas Day. Those days in 2019 may have had their unique flavors, but for the most part they were like other Christmases we had known over the years. That's one of the things that we love so

much about this season: the rituals, the songs, the aromas and foods and textures and sensations—they're all like other Christmases in our lives, and they remind us of every era of our lives from early childhood to last year.

But, very little we have been experiencing in this 20 20 season of Advent is like anything we have ever known. Starting with Thanksgiving Day, we have been derailed by circumstance. We have complied with the scientific advice to wear a mask, to wash our hands, to stay a safe distance from one another, to keep our voices down. Washing our hands is always a good idea, but the other protocols we follow fly in the face of our expectations. We absolutely must continue to practice them, even as we feel the emotional isolation and loneliness that accompanies our physical isolation from one another.

>>>

And with Christmas just six days away, we long to hear something familiar, something to connect us to the story and to each other. It's good that today we are in the hands of an accomplished story-teller, the Gospel writer Luke. Luke is said to be a master of detail in his telling of the Good News, but here we see he is also a keen observer of human emotions and relationships.

The shape of today's episode is familiar to anyone who has read a novel. We meet Mary, whom the physician Luke takes great pains for us to know is a virgin. Mary's life with Joseph is already planned: they will get married, settle down in their little village, and lead a quiet life while they raise a family. The children will grow up, Joseph and Mary will grow old, and eventually they will pass on into the next life along with their ancestors, becoming a quiet and happy memory for their children.

Of course, that would be nice. But boring. Luke brings us the vision of an angel—another one of those Be-Not-Afraid messengers like the ones in Isaiah, and Joel, and Daniel, like the ones we've been hearing about these past four months. This one has a name, Gabriel, and this one brings one very particular complication into Mary's life. She's bringing another life into her relationship with Joseph, a life that can only be explained in divine terms.

That's already enough to push Mary off the path she's been following. But there's more complication to come: the child that will grow inside her is destined for a singular kind of greatness. He is the heir to David, and a manifestation of Yahweh in the flesh.

That's enough to bring everything Mary had taken for granted about her engagement crashing down around her. That's

complication enough for any story, and it was all happening to her in real time. When it all came crashing down, there was one familiar face she sought out.

One to one, Mary's elder cousin Elizabeth connected her with what was familiar even as she affirmed the truth of Mary's vision. One to one, Elizabeth encouraged Mary to embrace the Good News she had been given. One to one, Elizabeth reassured her that God was with Mary even though her plans were derailed and her path had changed.

>>>

Plans derailed...traditional notions challenged...for many of us in this week before Christmas these words may hit very close to home.

I know we can't do what we have always done in this season of tradition and reconnection. I suspect that plans have been made, and broken, and made again, and broken again in these past four weeks. I'm pretty sure that almost everyone watching this gathering has had to establish a Plan "B" for this coming week that does not involve getting into a car, or a train, or an airplane. And those of you who may be planning to do these things know there are risks.

But with plans derailed, we are still blessed to live in this age when we have other ways to reach out. We may not be able to share a dessert together, but we are able to leave tokens of Yuletide goodness on doorsteps. We may not be able to catch up on each other's lives next to the fireplace, but we have the opportunity to share our news in a card or a letter, We may not be able to have that gathering where we marvel over the children's growth in a year and the new ways in which they express themselves, but we have cameras and videos and chat applications that allow us to be with each other in real time.

Every gesture we offer...every card we send...every chat we join...they're all reminders. They are reminders we are not alone. They are reminders of God, With Us. Just as Gabriel's greeting reminded Mary that God is with her, our greetings and our well wishes and our delighted expressions remind our beloved that God is with us.

>>>

It's natural to look wistfully at the path from which we have been derailed, to look at its comfort and familiarity and recall how nice it would have been to be on that path right about now.

But the path on which we find ourselves is exotic. It is rich with possibilities and opportunities to remind each other of the good news that God is with us.

With Mary's embrace of God's message of Good News in our minds and hearts, may we approach this holy day of Christmas with anticipation in our minds, and compassion for one another in our hearts. May the Holy Child find our hearts open to his work in our lives.

May you be blessed, and may you know the joy of God's presence in your life. Amen.