

Blessed, Fearful Birth

Sermon Preached at Foundry United Methodist Church

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Isaiah 40:6-11

Luke 1:26-38

The mystic Meister Eckhardt said, "We are all meant to be the mothers of God."

Let us pray. Oh Holy child of Bethlehem, descend to us we pray. Cast out our sin and enter in. Be born in us today. Amen

This last Sunday before Christmas is Mary's Sunday. Today is the day that the angel comes to Mary.

I want us to think about two details of the story of the Angel Gabriel coming to Mary to share with her the news of the birth of Christ within her heart and body.

The first detail is this. The Gospel of Luke says that Mary was much perplexed. Older translations used to say that she was greatly troubled -- but I like the New Revised Standard Version translation that says she was "much perplexed." It resonates.

The second detail of this story that I want to lift up for us is that when the angel spoke to Mary, when she was much perplexed, this is what the angel said to her: "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God." Do not be afraid, Mary, for you are blessed.

Mary was much perplexed, and the angel said to her - "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you are blessed."

I want to suggest this morning that when God is being born in us, and is being born into the world through us, that we will very often find ourselves much perplexed.

We think that if we can understand something then maybe we can control it. If we can comprehend it then we can apprehend it and control it. But God is always somewhere beyond our understanding, beyond our comprehension and beyond our control.

So, inevitably, when God is being born in us, and into the world through us, we will very likely find ourselves much perplexed.

I've had a hard time with this sermon. The sermon this week was very slippery. When I thought I was getting a hold of it, it would slip away. When sermons are that way with me, it is often because there is a message in the sermon that I myself don't particularly want to hear.

What I realized, as I wrestled with this sermon, is that I do not like being much perplexed. The very nature of the Christian life is that, when God is being born in us and through us, we will most of the time find ourselves much perplexed.

We really won't be able to really understand or fully control what is going on inside of our life when God is being born in us and through us.

What I've been remembering this week is that this is particularly true about being the pastor of a church.

I'm back in a local church after a number of years working on the conference staff where life is much more manageable. Pastoring a church, even though you can read all of the books about how to do it organizationally and about what has worked in other places, finally, in the final analysis, pastoring a church is about God being born into the world through us. It is something you can't control. So, if you are a pastor, and if you're not just trying to lead an organization, but if you're really trying to be the pastor of a church, you will find yourself much of the time much perplexed.

I came here with a six month agenda. I was going to have house meetings, and I was going to listen as much as I could. Now the six months are over, and someone soon may expect me to start doing something other than listening.

I'm remembering again that you can read the books, but when God is being born into the world through us, you can't follow a diagram. You work it through in a condition of being much perplexed.

When new pastors come to a church, people are initially so relieved that we're not worse than we are. We go through a sort of phase where everything is very, very nice, like a honeymoon.

Anyone who is in a committed relationship knows that honeymoons eventually end. One day she worships the ground that you walk on, and the next day she's telling you not to put your sneakers in the closet because she doesn't want her dresses smelling like your feet. (I just pulled that example out of the thin air.)

When God is being born into our lives and being born into the world, we will, much of the time, find ourselves much perplexed.

I learned very early on that when I do hospital visits, and I'm sitting next to the bed of someone in the hospital, and in one way or another they are asking me the question "Why?" they are not really interested in hearing Paul Tillich's theory of theodicy. In the hospital, often the only possible thing to do is to sit there much perplexed.

Whenever God is being born into our lives and into the world, it will be beyond our comprehension and apprehension. Much of the time, we will not really know what is going on or why. We will find ourselves much perplexed.

When Mary was much perplexed, the Angel Gabriel said to her this (and this is really the sermon to myself and to you this morning) "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you are blessed."

When we are much perplexed, the danger is for us to tighten up, to become self absorbed, to become wrapped up in our own feelings, our own worries, our own uncertainties or to become angry at the confusion around us about the things that are happening that we can't understand. At those times in our life, the Angel Gabriel says to us "Do not be afraid" for this thing that is happening to you, that you don't understand, is really a blessing. This thing that is happening to you is Christ being born in you and into the world through you. This thing that you don't understand and leaves you much perplexed is really a blessing.

It is always a blessing. God is always blessing us. No matter what it seems like or feels like. No matter what fears we have. It is always a blessing.

When I sit in a hospital room and someone asks in one way or another the question "Why?" this is the only answer I have. My prayers in the hospital often go like this: "Oh God, today we are much perplexed. We don't really understand what is happening in our lives or why. But we trust, that you are here - in the midst of this thing that is happening in us and through us. Though we don't understand and though we are much perplexed, we will seek to not be afraid, and to believe that, in this thing that vwe are going through, there is a blessing, even though it is hard for us to see."

We are all meant to be the mothers of God. We are all very often much perplexed. The angel says to us, "I know it's hard, but do not be afraid because you are being blessed."