

Luke 2:1-16 (NRSV)

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!" When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger.

Grace to you and peace, from God our Father and from our Lord Jesus Christ.

I was all ready for last Sunday. I was. For some reason, I didn't take very seriously the reports of the storm that was coming. Now I suppose none of us will ever forget the Christmas Blizzard of 2009. Partly I'd had such fun putting together the sermon for last Sunday that I couldn't imagine not preaching it.

You see, I had noticed something for the first time – I had noticed that if God had done with Jesus what God had done before, that Elizabeth and not Mary would have been his mother. Now Elizabeth was the mother of John the Baptist. But she was also in a long tradition of faithful and long-suffering mothers of the people of God who were too old to give birth, but who did anyway. Sarai, wife of Abraham; Rachel, wife of Jacob; Hannah, wife of Elkanah – all of them had in common that they had lived to a great age and continued to believe that God would give them a child, long after sensible people, people like Elizabeth's husband Zechariah, had stopped believing.

So if God had continued to do things the way God had done them in the past, Jesus would have been the reward for Elizabeth's faithful belief in God's promises. Like Isaac, like Joseph, like Samuel, Jesus was the promised child, the child who had been promised to the people of God.

But Jesus was *not* born to Elizabeth, but rather to Mary – and Mary was a young woman who had never been disappointed, who had no doubts, who had no fears of being barren, a woman whose life had barely begun. This is not a woman who has waited her whole life to be rewarded with a baby, who has kept faith against all odds. No, her faith is of a different sort – God's gift has come to her *before* she is ready, before she has had a chance to wish for anything except a happy childhood and now, perhaps, a gentle and loving husband.

God's gift is still a test of her faith all right, but that test comes *after* God's gift rather than before it. *Because* of God's gift to her in the form of this entirely unexpected pregnancy, she winds up

exposing herself and her husband-to-be to scandal and ridicule. Because of God's gift to her, she will journey much of her life – to Elizabeth's home, to Bethlehem, later to Egypt and then back to Nazareth. Because of God's gift to her she will be blessed and disappointed, raised up and cast down. Mary's gift is the beginning of her journey of faith, not the reward for it.

Maybe because we are a young nation, a young culture, Mary's story grabs us. Mary's story is a young person's story, a new people's story, a story in which a young woman is touched by God and responds in faith. The story of that touch and that response feels like the story of Christianity and even more, like the story of this nation, touched by God and struggling to respond in faith and in hope. Maybe that's why Advent is such a popular season of the church in this country. Maybe that's why Christmas is our favorite holiday, more popular than Easter or Pentecost even though these other feasts may have more significance for the faith. Christmas and Advent and Mary are stories of hope and youth and new beginnings, and of God's ability to bring newness and beauty and grace into the world, not just once but all the time.

But the other thing that Mary's story tells us is that the most predictable thing about God is that God is surprising. God is always appearing where we least expect it. Sometimes God brings new life to a couple too old to have children. Sometimes God brings new life to a couple too *young* to have children. God keeps giving new life to people who don't expect it, to places that don't know what to do with it and in ways that they don't immediately understand or appreciate. That's what I wanted to tell you last Sunday, and I would have, except that God dropped two feet of snow on us, a thing that I at least didn't expect. That's the nature of God.

You see, you or I may be ready for last Sunday, but God is ready for next Sunday. God knows that we aren't ready, not yet, so God is gentle. Those people in the stable two thousand years ago thought they were ready. They'd listened to the angels. They'd

followed the star. They thought they knew what was coming. They were wrong, as it turns out, but they were wrong in a wonderful way. What was coming was a man who would be a King very different from all the kings they had ever known, a King who would rule by love rather than fear and hope rather than might. What was coming was more and better and different from anything they could ever have expected.

He always is. Merry Christmas!

Amen.