

For the people of St. Philip's
December 21, 2008
Advent IV, Year B
Luke 1:26-38
Maria Hoecker, preacher

And so we read today, Mary pondered. I love that word, ponder. I use it all the time, I'm a pondering, ponderous ponderer. It's when we think over things, take some time to sit with an idea and think it through.

Mary had much to ponder. Nothing prepares one for the shock and miracle of bearing a child. Certainly Mary, at the time of Gabriel's announcement could not comprehend all that would flow from a shadowing of the Holy Spirit. Surely as she pondered her fate in those brief moments, she could not comprehend the ultimate outcome. She would be bearing a child on behalf of all of us. Mary trusted an Angel of God who promised that God was with her. Not understanding... she ponders and plants those words like precious seeds in her heart. Her vision is not equal to what her unborn son's would be, but her heart, like chosen ground, is deep enough to sustain the highest tree.

Anyone who would understand the nature of a tree should examine the earth that encloses its roots, the dark soil, mostly hidden from our sight from which the sap climbs into branch, blossom and fruit. Similarly, to understand the person of Jesus Christ, we must look at the woman who brought him forth from her dark womb.

I remember when I first discovered I was pregnant with Chloe I had this realization that the larger I grew, the more it would hurt to deliver my child. "how is THIS, going to come out of THERE?!?" There was no getting out of it. I didn't want to get out of it. I loved my unborn baby. But I had to move through her delivery, toward it, not knowing how it would all turn out...the experience was a great unknown. Once Chloe was born, I held her and sobbed for more than a few days because I wished I could keep her safe inside of me. I didn't want her to be hurt by the world. Then I went right back at it three years later with Max, a bit more wizened about the labor of delivery, but then of course his delivery was completely different than Chloe's.

Labor and Delivery isn't just about birthing babies either. When the annunciation of God is brought to any of us by an angel, how do we respond to the call to carry, labor over, and birth a new life- a new ministry- a new path toward healing- a glorious impossible?

From the first hour of Jesus' life to his last, he was enfolded in the nearness of his mother. The strongest part of their relationship was her nearness as he was called away. Everything that affected Jesus affected Mary. In the beginning she contained the life of her holy child, but soon he outgrew her, growing steadily into a world of the divine that was beyond her reach.

We read today of Mary's consent to freedom within God. It is also a time to consider whether our ponderings have prepared us to make a Christmas consent to God becoming one of us. Do we believe in the Glorious Impossible? The author Madeleine L'Engle invites us to ponder. "Do we have the ability to see within the contours of a human infant, our Savior who is Christ our Lord? For to us a child is born, yet this child grows up showing us that the greatest power is in weakness, the greatest majesty is in meekness, and this leaves us all grieving and rejoicing at the same time." (The Irrational Season. Harper and Row: San Francisco. 1977. Page 18)

Saying yes to God-with-us is hard because “If we accept this birth, we must accept God’s love within us. As Mary discovered, God’s love is filled with pain as well as joy. (Ibid.)

In order to fully comprehend the approach of Christmas, we must also ponder Jesus’ Passion, Crucifixion and Resurrection. We must ponder our own fear of the unexpected...the inevitable. Continually we have to move through the despair and numbness that surrounds us. It’s hard work, not to get stuck. We are asked to say “yes” to a faith that we cannot see. We are called to allow ourselves to be amazed by the annunciations going on all around us, in all of us, all of the time.

Mary’s joy and grief were both fully present within her. We have to know that just as Mary and Joseph celebrated the birth of their son, they must also have felt some sadness that they were homeless and later thrown into exile from life as they previously knew it. They were far away from their loved ones and confused because even though they had agreed to have the baby, they still didn’t fully comprehend what was going on. None of us ever do fully comprehend the complexity of God’s will in the fullness of time.

As we prepare to sing the joyful praises of Christ’s birth, we are called to share a holy communion. Always we remember that not too long after Jesus was born ‘with us’, Jesus died ‘for us’ freely giving his own life so that we might also become beloved Children of God.

Why should we remember Christ’s death at the time of his birth? Because we need to break open our own numbness and sadness and longing in order to remember that this infant child of God, this weak child born to an ordinary girl, -this child, Jesus- made the glorious impossible come true for us.

One of my favorite authors, Kathleen Norris writes that in the annunciation Mary had a question for Gabriel, “How can this be?” Mary doesn’t lose her voice in this question~ she finds it. Like any of the prophets, she asserts herself before God saying, ‘Here am I.’ There is no arrogance, just holy fear and wonder. Mary proceeds, making her commitment without knowing much about what it will entail or where it will lead. It’s all any of us can do. ...ponder our commitments without knowing much about what it will entail or where it will lead.

I have a Coptic icon of the Annunciation that I keep in my bedroom window directly in front of my writing desk. I ponder it year-round. Its presence in my daily life invites me to respond to whatever is happening with a dance of joy and grief... “Here I am, Lord...let it be.” “Here I am Lord, ...let it be.” When the mystery of God’s love breaks through, do we run from it? Or can we be cracked open enough to respond from our deepest truest self and say something new, something that quite possibly brings us as much pain as it brings us joy. Can we, like Mary, utter a quiet ‘yes’ that will change us forever?

The Spirit, who announced and filled Mary so long ago and far away, wants to be reborn in us, in our lives. Just as Jesus was borne by Mary and in this world, while she was at work in her kitchen, her street, in her house, in her field, in the commonness of her life here on earth. We too are being born into an extraordinarily ordinary new life.

Prepare. Expect. Ponder. Listen. Jesus is on his way.