

SLD12.21.08 4th Advent Mary's Sunday
Emory Presbyterian Church
Luke 1:26-38
Jill Oglesby Evans

“Conked Out On the Hay”

Today is Mary's Sunday, one of my favorite Sundays of the year, when even we Protestants get to “hail Mary.”

Before we get to Mary, though, the paces of the Advent season demand that we first acknowledge the Kingdom of God, what we experience of it, and what we do not. Then we've got to endure our annual glare from John the Baptist, aka Wayne Burdette, as he reminds us of the inescapable nature of our personal and corporate sin. This year following our repentance, we were treated to a soothing Sunday of Psalms and songs. Now, finally, has arrived the 4th Sunday of Advent when we turn our attention to Jesus' Mom.

Today's text offers the familiar story of the angel Gabriel's visitation to Mary and her subsequent surrender to and cooperation with God's purposes. Next in Luke comes Mary's Magnificat, that ecstatic song of praise in which her soul magnifies the Lord and her spirit rejoices in God her Savior. But all that was nine months ago, back when angels hovered and the Holy Spirit pulsed, and all things seemed possible.

Chances are Mary's singing a different song today, and not all of it praise. For today Mary, ripe as a peach in a southern summer and just as easily bruised, is bumping along a dirty road on a dusty donkey, plodding her way toward Bethlehem. Ready...no doubt *past* ready...to be delivered of her holy burden, Mary's lovely lips are likely set less in beatification today than in grim determination. For by now, whatever God has seeded in Mary is ready to blossom into a life of its own, and all she can do is

hang on and go with the flow, so to speak. Take it a day at a time. Do the next right thing. And trust that God knows whatever the heck God is doing.

This week I got a Christmas card from my big sister that made me laugh. It wasn't supposed to, I don't think. On the front of it is a quiet, sweet scene from a 19th century painting by Marianne Stokes. I've put the card on the communion table in case anyone wants to see it following worship. On it, Mary and the baby Jesus are seated in the stable, attended by two delicate androgynous angels playing lyres. The angels look pensive, maybe even sad, perhaps because of the cross imprinted on Jesus' halo. Jesus, on the other hand, all wrapped in swaddling clothes and safely ensconced in Mary's arms, appears healthy, happy and somewhat startled, as though surprised suddenly by the flash of a camera.

But Mary, young, exhausted Mother of God Mary on whose lap the Christ child lays, has keeled over sideways and lies fast asleep on the hay. To make her more comfortable, someone, maybe one of the angels, has placed a cloth over the hay where her face lay. But Mary herself looks as though lying on a bed of nails wouldn't have made the slightest difference. Wiped out from God's work, Mary has simply conked out on the hay. I guess that's why I laughed; now *this* was a Mary I could relate to, both as a minister and a mom.

I remember a child's lamp I had in Christopher's nursery – the figure on it a hen who'd been reading to a chick on her lap. The hen had fallen asleep, the book fallen to the floor, but the chick sat up all perky and ready for whatever was coming next. That was peppy Jesus on Mary's lap. God's new beginning packaged, sealed, delivered, and ready to go, on the lap of worn-out mom.

But there's something else on Mary's face than the bone-weary exhaustion of the mother of a newborn. I see trust there, too. Trust, and peace. As though Mary knows she's done the best she could with her part – answered God's call, said "yes," and then let the chips fall where they may. In fact, she's still doing the best she can with her part, swaddling and nurturing and nursing God's Son. But however essential to Jesus' birth Mary is, perhaps she realizes that whatever's coming next is not dependent upon her. She'll participate. Once she wakes up, why Mary will throw herself into loving and supporting and protecting that boy.... She'll raise him and teach him and follow him when he becomes a man. She'll even stand by and watch him die, and like any mom, grieve the loss of her child 'til the end of her days.

But today, in the painting at least, Mary sleeps, with an expression on her face that suggests that somewhere deep down she knows that, finally, the future of God's beginnings is not in her hands.

I have always appreciated Mary's spunk and admired her courage in agreeing to God's plan in the first place. But today I'm appreciating her trust. Her confidence that what God began, God will complete. Her humility that, for all her personal investment, she's not the only one contributing to the enterprise. Her confidence that for all her fierce love, there is One who loves her boy even more than she.

Mary's trust seems all the more poignant for our knowing what's going to happen to her boy. Mary doesn't know. How could she possibly have known what she was getting into when she said "yes" to Gabriel? What would be required of her. How God would change her. What would happen to her and her boy. Perhaps it's by design that parents never know what they're getting into when they have a kid. If Mary had known,

she might not have said “yes.” She might not have told Gabriel to “let it be with me according to your word.” She might have told him to go find some other unmarried virgin to seed with a son who’s going to die on a cross, thank you very much.

But Mary *didn’t* know what all God was up to. What all God would require of her and her boy. How it’d all turn out. Any more than any of us has a handle on the whole picture of our own lives and what God is finally doing in and with and through them. Mary didn’t know. She simply trusted.

For me, the image of Mary conked out on the hay is an encouraging reminder of that trust, as well as of the radical divine/human collaboration that produced the Son of God. Jesus couldn’t have been born without Mary, but Mary certainly couldn’t accomplished God’s plan for Jesus on her own. Looks like it takes God and humanity both to cook up the Bread of Heaven, gestate the Prince of Peace, and manifest the Light of the World, a recipe at work still today.

Author Regina Ryan asks, “are not each one of us invited to conceive the Sacred One within our(selves)? Are not each one of us called upon to wait for the overshadowing of the Holy Spirit...? Is it not our job to nurture God by healthy devotional practice, honoring the body, and celebrating the mystery of life that is (continually) taking place in each one of us?”¹

To this day, if Jesus Christ is fathered by God, he is mothered and made manifest by you and me. Kind of makes you proud, doesn’t it? How essential humanity’s role is to deliver God to the world? Though I look at what sort of job you and

¹ The Woman Awake, Feminine Wisdom for Spiritual Life, Regina Sara Ryan, Hohm Press, Prescott, Arizona, 1998. P.82.

I are doing and I don't feel so cocky. We may be essential to the process of incarnation but we sure don't seem all that consistently effective at it.

But again I remember Mother Mary conked out on the hay, and am comforted to recall how God works in and through and sometimes regardless of our personal strengths, weaknesses and dispositions. And Hallelujah for that! We do what we can, some of us even do the *best* we can, to participate in what we imagine to be God's scheme for our lives and our community. But God's plan is not finally dependent on you and I and our burned out, stressed out, conked out selves.

"Granted, there are ways (one) can willfully orient (oneself) so as to be more like to fall into the path of the Holy Spirit," says Rayan, yet..."how little is the process of spiritual awakening in our own hands. Since when does the seed stand up in the gardener's palm and demand its rightful place in the furrows? Can the seed direct the rain? Like an embryo awaiting birth, the seed will erupt...and push its way through the soil in a paroxysm of agony and ecstasy when the timing and the environment say so, and not a moment sooner."

It may take us both – you and God, me and God, us and God, to cook up the Bread of Heaven, pour out the Cup of Salvation, and gestate and deliver Joy to the World, but the good news is that if we get weary, God does not. If we can't see the big picture, God can. If we keel over from exhaustion or stress or confusion about next steps, God's angels will attend us with compassion, to be sure, but the chunky, startled new life God started in us will keep growing and developing and demanding our attention.

14th century mystic, Julian of Norwich (remember the hazelnuts?) advised that the worst hindrance to spiritual growth is the failure to trust that what God has begun in us will be brought to completion by God as well.² *The worst hindrance to spiritual growth is the failure to trust that what God has begun in us will be brought to completion by God as well.* This is easily forgotten because, frankly, waiting for God to do God's thing can be excruciating, especially when we're not altogether sure what God's thing is. Even when we have a *hunch* about what God is up to, it can be difficult to trust that what God has begun will be brought to completion by God.

Frank Capra said "a hunch is creativity trying to tell you something." I believe creativity is God trying to tell us something. At our session retreat a few weeks ago, our elders had a hunch about God would like us to join God in cooking up some new future for Emory Church. The best we could express our collective hunch is in our new Vision statement that states, among other things, that

"Emory Presbyterian Church will become a congregation of 200 by 2012." And that "Our community will know us for inspiring worship, excellence in music, enriching education, and life-changing service through Christ to the world."

That's our hunch about the new life God has seeded at Emory Church. You might say the Vision Statement is our way of saying "yes" to God. And while we'll all hopefully do our collective best to live into that "yes," our deepest trust must be that what God has begun in us will be brought to completion by God. Who knows how exactly God will accomplish what God has begun? Who knows what form or forms our transformation will take? Or how things will look at the end of our path? At the end of

² Ibid. p. xviii.

Mary's path was her son dying on a cross. Even then, who knew what Life God would wrench from Jesus' death?

Today is Mary's Sunday, the day we celebrate the one who bore God to the world, and learn from her how to become God-Bearers ourselves. For there is *no person* in whom God cannot seed new life, no individual whom God's intention can not overshadow, no person or community through whom God cannot be born. The divine process, the God-bearing spirit, that claimed and overshadowed Mary, overshadows and claims each one of us as well. Just as it claims and overshadows this community of faith. Our challenge here at Emory Church individually and collectively is to trust that what God has begun in us will be brought to completion by God as well. Whether or not we recognize, believe, or understand it, or are forever conking out on the hay, God's will WILL have God's way. And God's Way is to keep bearing new life through us with which to bless the world.

For God's Kingdom to come, it takes us both. To cook up the Bread of Heaven, to pour out the Cup of Salvation, to gestate and deliver Joy to the World, it takes you and God, me and God, us and God. The good news is, if we get weary, God does not. If we can't see the big picture, God can. If we keel over from exhaustion, stress or confusion about next steps, God's angels may attend us, but that chunky, startled new life God started in us is going to keep on growing into the Light of the World. What God has begun in us will be brought to completion by God as well.

But, such somber thoughts on the eve of a baby's birth.... Why, a baby's birth changes everything, doesn't it? Ask Lindy and Darryl, James and Carrie, Sarge and Brooke. Ask Jessica. A newborn's scent, its sense, its innocence, its demands and

needs shift the whole universe into new crises and possibilities. The best we can do is swaddle and nurture the new life God seeds in our scattered, stressed lives, and trust that, even when we're conked out on the hay, the Breath of God keeps breathing, the heart of God keeps beating, and the hope and the power and the light of God keeps growing and spreading within and among us.

The Sufi, Hamid, said this to his wide-eyed pupil, Reshad Field: "If you can melt into Mary, the matrix, the blueprint of life, you will be formed and shaped in Christ, and Christ will be formed and shaped in you."³

If we can melt into the matrix of Mary - trust, strength, patience, surrender, and again, trust – you and I will be formed and shaped in Christ, Christ will be formed and shaped in us, and what God has begun will be complete. May it be so.

To the glory of God. Amen.

³ Ibid p. 83