

December 18, 2011

**The Fourth Sunday in Advent**

Luke 1:26-38

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Georgia

*The Rev'd Elizabeth Shows Caffey, associate rector*

*If as Herod, we fill our lives with things and again things. If we consider ourselves so unimportant that we must fill every moment of our lives with action. When will we have time to make the slow journey across the desert as did the magi? Or sit and watch the stars as did the shepherds? Or brood over the coming of the child as did Mary? For each one of us there is a desert to travel, a star to discover, and a being within ourselves to bring to life.*

*-- Michael Podesta*

For nine months, Mary carried within her this growing baby, Jesus, this amazing being who was being knit together in his mother's womb becoming fully human. And she carried within her this baby, Jesus, who is God – the God of power and might and love. She held within her body this fine and beautiful fusion of God and human intertwined together as one. Mary literally carried God within her. For nine months she contemplated her baby, the promised Messiah, the king of David, the son of God. And for those nine months she carried the mantle as sole guardian and nurturer of this child. And when the time came, Mary labored to bring forth the light of God into the world in the baby Jesus. What a selfless gift.

We are each just like Mary. We are faithful. Just as she said Yes to God in her willingness to bear this child, we too have each said Yes to God through our baptisms and again at our confirmation. And just as Mary struggles with the weight of her decision, and is much perplexed by all that occurs because of it. We too walk that same journey, we too struggle with living into our commitment to be faithful people of God and we too frequently find ourselves perplexed by God and by the world around us. We are just like Mary.

And because we are just like Mary, we must remember how sacred we are. Now, let me be clear from the outset, I do not have any sort of God-complex or Sainthood complex at play here (at least I don't think I do). As Geoffrey so often reminds us, the role of Lord and Savior has already been filled. However, however – we each are created in the image of God: male and female, gay and straight, black, white, brown, we are each and every one of us beautifully and wonderfully created in God's image. And having been so created, we can't help but be a reflection of God to the world. Like Mary, we also carry within us the light of God. We have that interplay of divinity and humanity within us. We are not Jesus. The Christ child that we are anxiously awaiting is the one and only God incarnate – fully human and fully divine.

But in our creation, and through our baptism, and each and every time we participate in the Eucharistic feast, we have each been marked by God's love. We carry on our

foreheads the sign of the cross where we were indelibly marked with love as Christ's own forever. And we continue to gather together around this table and remember and take into ourselves God's outpouring of love for us. God's love transforms us and makes us sacred. You are beloved by God.

Sacred – it's not comfortable to recognize that aspect of ourselves. It's not easy to take on that responsibility of reflecting God to the world, of sharing that divine, sacred being within ourselves. It feels easier to recognize those strengths that serve us well in the secular world, in our daily lives. It probably doesn't seem practical or applicable when living in the mundane reality of our lives for us to worry whether we are hiding away the person God created us to be. But God gives us the gift of unconditional love, a love that we take into ourselves and carry with us. It has become almost second-nature for us to interact with the world from a purely secular perspective: checking off our to-do lists, weighing costs and benefits. It is prudent and self-protective to engage with the world around us in this way. But it is second nature, it is not our primary nature. And as a secondary nature, it doesn't take into account this interplay we carry within ourselves as people of God. Our primary nature is beloved creation of God and a reflection of our creator. We are, at the core of our beings, individuals of faith, beloved by God. Our value is not found in the numbers on our quarterly reports or in our billable hours. We are sacred because we are loved by God. And we are a reflection of that love to the world.

So, cherish that love. Like Mary, be guardians and nurturers of that divine light within yourselves. In this last week of Advent, I challenge you to do something that might feel impossible to do in the midst of your final Christmas preparations. Remember to put yourself first. Set aside time to nurture the light of God within you. It is important. We each have that beautifully and wonderfully complex divine and human essence of ourselves that we carry with us. And we hide that part of ourselves away from the world. But that is not what God wants for us, to hide ourselves away. We, like Mary, must ponder, and perplex, and labor to bring forth the divine within us and share ourselves and our lives as a gift to the whole world.

A wonderful gift of this community recently has been the new Rhythms of Grace service that we have started. It is a multi-sensory service designed specifically for children who are on the autism spectrum, and while it is different from what we do here on Sunday mornings, it is a service that we all can connect with. There is music, storytelling, exploring of scripture, and Eucharist. And there are colors, and textures, and images, and dancing and squealing. As you look around your chapel you will see kids and adults of all sizes and abilities shifting from the activity in one corner to another. And at times you may see a child walk over to the quiet spot to regroup, but then later move back into the gathering. It is beautiful, joyful, worshipful, expression of our response to God's love.

And just like every other worship service here at All Saints', this too is a service where God invites each of us to come as we are: broken, joyful, tired, in pain, energetic, jubilant – God invites us all and gathers us in. The road is not an easy one for any of these children who have been diagnosed with special needs, and it can feel incredibly

challenging for their families who support them with love. But when they are all gathered here in this sanctuary, in this space, they can rest and renew themselves. The moment that the children enter this space they know that they are loved, unconditionally loved by God. And they reflect with movement and vocalizations and facial expressions their experience of God's love. They reflect the divine within them back out to the world, like a bright beacon lighting up the darkness. You can see it shining in the captivated face of the little boy as he places himself within the arms of the priest as she leads the Eucharistic prayer. His response to our story of God's love – was to come closer, as close as he possibly could – to see it, to hear the story told, to touch the bread, the wine. And you can feel God's love palpate across the room in the unbridled joy that courses through the children as they get up to dance using their whole bodies, and as they sing boldly, and even in the tight, self-conscious swaying movement of the adults as we all sing together "This little light of mine." In these movements and sounds you can feel God's love course through this community gathered together. And once again we are strengthened to be God's people in the world. Once again we are reminded that we are each a love letter from God to the world, that we are each sacred, we are each a reflection of our Creator.

In this last week of Advent, as we journey along with Mary toward Bethlehem and await with bated breath the coming of Christ, embrace this time as a chance to nurture and tend to the divine within you. Remember that you are a cherished gift to the world. Nurture that divine spark within.

Let your light shine.