

November 29, 2020 The Obedient Servant Luke 1:26-38

Dearly Beloved;

It was Dr. Seuss who created “How The Grinch Stole Christmas.” This year the Grinch is a virus we can’t even see. It makes people sick. It kills. It causes us to have to self isolate. And even if we get to worship “live” in the sanctuary, we won’t get to sing the carols as we are used to doing. At the risk of appearing to be the proverbial optimist, I am going to say something you would not expect to hear. There is a very special blessing awaiting us in the celebrating of Christmas in our own homes, with our nuclear family, or at least the few who can gather with us. What caused the Grinch’s heart to grow three times its size? It was that having taken their toys, their decorations, even the roast Christmas beast, the Whos down in Whoville, still gathered under the stars to sing praise. What I am suggesting is that our muted celebration this year presents a unique opportunity to remember what Christmas is really about, the birthday of a child, who would become a man, who would die on a cross and rise from the dead on the Sunday morning 3 days later. It is about Jesus and God’s redeeming love. And this year, for all the challenges, even the pain, and suffering of not being able to do all the things we would normally do, in the way we would do them, that remains the heart of the history of the holiday season. Keep it. Keep it as safely as you can. But remember it is not about toys, or crowds, or parties. It is about Jesus. The virus cannot change that, if we do not allow it. I am hopeful the church will reopen for Sunday worship. We will let you know when we are sure it is safe to

assemble, masked, sanitized, distanced...you know the drill.
May God bless you and keep you.
Morley Mitchell

Protestants, including Presbyterians do not make a big deal about Mary. In fact it is part of our history to almost ignore her. The good Lord has a sense of humour. At this time of the year, “the most wonderful time of the year,” it is impossible to ignore the young woman whose life had been arranged for her. She was supposed to marry Joseph, an older man, a man we call a carpenter, which in fact simply means he worked in construction. I have seen it with my own eyes...there is not a lot of wood in Israel, and in fact there is very little wood in the construction of homes and buildings in Israel. What they have in abundance is rock. And they have been building with it since the time of David the King. What that really means is that if we are going to use “modern” job titles, Joseph was probably closer to being a brick layer, a stone mason than he was to being a carpenter. But this day does not belong to Joseph. It belongs to the young woman whom God chose for a singular purpose.

An angel of God visits her and announces to her that she has “found favour with God.” Luke tells us that she was troubled by that greeting. I get it. Ministry has always been my passion. It can be painful, and challenging to be “favoured in God’s sight.” Mary was not only a faithful Jewish girl, she knew stuff. She knew what happened to the prophets, who on the one hand were privileged to serve God by carrying HIS

wonderful word, and on the other hand paid with their lives for doing so when they offended the establishment. Isaiah was not unique in that he was martyred because he insisted what he was saying was “the word of the LORD.” When Mary is told she has found favour with God, warning bells go off in her head. Her heart sinks. Her soul responds with both fear and faith. We are told the same thing happened to the shepherds...”seized by mighty dread” and “praising God for what they saw and heard.”

Mary is told that she will have a child, and we know the child was Jesus. Yesterday in preparation for the 1st Sunday in Advent I found myself in the little room under our basement stairs. It is the place where we store the Christmas ornaments, and decorations. We have a number of wall hangings that proclaim messages like “do you hear what I hear,” while the major image is that of the star of Bethlehem looking very much like the spangled cross of Calvary. Deep under the balance of the pile of plastic bins in which we store this stuff is a cardboard box that fits under the lowest step of the basement stairs. It contains the ceramic figures of our Nativity Set. It is Barbara’s tradition, and lesson to her family including the old guy who grumbles about having to move everything twice, that this display of the Bethlehem birth must be in place for the Sunday we call Advent One. So today the figure of the baby rests in the manger, Mary is prominent, Joseph is there, the shepherds, and the wisemen, the friendly beasts that belong in a stable, and of course a throng (20...I counted them) angels.

The cast of the Christmas story is a cast of servants...servants of God. Last week we saw Isaiah the prophet was a willing servant. He volunteered. "Here am I send me." Mary did not get that choice. She is chosen to the task. The thing we must remember about her, and it is ever right to remember about her, is that she was an obedient servant. That she will become pregnant, not by Joseph, nor by any other man, means she trembles in her obedience. Her life will be disrupted. Marriage plans will be cancelled and then reinstated. But she does this one thing and she does it wonderfully: she obeys God, and surrenders her life to HIS holy will. "I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me as you have said." It is simply marvelous. Remember that old hymn, "I surrender all." Sometimes we sing it. Mary did it.

And I want you to notice several details here. First of all her obedience is not blind. She knows how babies are made. She asks questions. "How can this be?" She is not asking a chemistry question, or looking for the secret equation. What her question involves is the idea that this impossible. It cannot be happening to her. She is promised in marriage to Joseph, who is a very religious man. This is going to go over like a lead balloon. The consequences could include things like being an outcast among her own people. She could get killed for this. Pregnant and not knowing "whose baby it is in human terms?" They stone women for this sort of thing in Judea in her day. Obedience...faithful obedience...does not mean we never ask questions. There are real consequences for being chosen of

God. Mary teaches us obedience that has its eyes open. She questions.

She has doubts. I would be very surprised if the the angel did not have to watch Mary weep. “How can this be. I am a virgin!” How about that. The first person to question the possibility of a virgin birth was not a liberal theologian, it was a wise and faithful young woman who has just met an angel of God face to face for the first time in her life, and finds what he is saying hard to believe. Don’t confuse obedience to God with never having doubts. Doubt is the tape measure that wrestles with the length, height and width of a miracle. Mary teaches us that lesson too.

And she has fears. I am tempted to say this Mary, who winds up the wife of Joseph, and follows Jesus down all the dusty roads in Galilee during Jesus ministry, who follows HIM to Jerusalem, when He teaches there, who watches Him die on that terrible cross, in that terrible way, who helps to bury HIM, who is one of 3 women to learn HE is risen, and goes and shares that news with the disciples...this Mary felt fear so many times! She teaches us it is indeed a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God. (Hebrews 10:31)

She also teaches us that in spite of our questions, our doubts, our fears, at the heart of faith is the willingness to obey and to serve God wherever HE leads, whatever HE asks, whatever HE wills. Mary is a marvelous young woman. She deserves more attention than we tend to give her. At the heart

of the Christmas story she is the prototype of the obedient servant of God.

Let us pray;

Lord, God, comforting Spirit, we bow before you in prayer in a time that drips with fear, and challenges our faith. We are used to be able to take medication to heal our sickness, shots of vaccine to prevent sickness, and in the age of Covid-19, we are reminded daily that people in our nation, In the USA and all around the world are dying from the infection. Help us that we might be strong. Quiet our fears with YOUR loving Spirit. Go with us when we must go out. Help us to self-isolate. Remind us we are not alone, when we are unable to socialize. Lord be with us as we worship in our homes. Hear our prayers and grant us grace to be obedient servants like YOUR mother Mary. Amen

Special Note:

Dear Members and Friends of St. Andrew's;

I have learned several things in the 24 hours since I wrote the pastoral note and the sermon. Our area is now classified as yellow, which means stricter measures should be taken. Based on what I have learned, the Session and I are in agreement that we should suspend public worship for the remainder of 2020. The Clerk of Session and I are in agreement, we will confer every 2 weeks and review our position as necessary. Please be careful, and do not go out into public spaces unless you have to. Communion will be celebrated on December 6, by video. For those who do not have on line access, take a piece of bread, a glass of juice or water, say a prayer over it then eat and drink.

Rev. Dr. Morley Mitchell