



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH

“Bearing God”

Scripture – Luke 1:26-38

Sermon preached by Sudie Niesen Thompson

Sunday, December 24, 2017

Afrah was my constant companion during my year as a volunteer in South India. At the time, she was a precocious 8-year-old, who had honed her English by watching Disney films, and who had all the spunk of Moana or Belle. I met Afrah on my first day of teaching; she was the only student in the school to share my bus stop, so the other teachers asked her to shepherd me off the bus when we reached our junction.

At the end of that week Afrah invited me in for tea; I met her mother, father, and four-year-old brother, who welcomed me with the much-needed feeling of family. Afrah’s parents extended an invitation to visit whenever I felt lonely, or bored, or hungry, and I gratefully took them up on their offer. Before long, I was spending most afternoons in their home, playing games with Afrah and her brother, or swapping stories with their mom over tea.

There are many things I treasure about my time spent with this family. But — above all — I give thanks for the times Afrah opened my eyes to the world around me:

There was the day — just before Christmas — when Afrah leaned out the open bus window to wave at a man, who was hanging a multi-colored Christmas Star on his porch. I was a bit perplexed to see my Muslim student greeting this Christian stranger so enthusiastically as our bus wound through the narrow roads.

“Do you know him?” I asked.

“No,” she replied. “But he’s our neighbor.”

And there was the afternoon a few months later, when Afrah and I went to pick up her little brother from his friend’s house. As we walked along the road, Afrah looked up at me with the matter-of-factness only children possess.

“Ma’am,” she said, “those people are staring at you.”

“It’s ok.” I said. “A lot of people stare at me. I’m getting used to it.”

Without missing a beat she replied, “It’s ok. You’re human, just like us.”

During that year I spent in India, I came to see Afrah as a *Theotokos* – a God-Bearer – someone who “births” God into the world. With the innocent wisdom of an 8-year-old, she disrupted my way of seeing, my way of being, so that I was able to behold God, as if the divine had momentarily assumed human flesh and dropped into our midst. Unbeknownst to Afrah, she bore God’s grace so that I could cradle this unexpected blessing in my arms, if only for a moment.

This is what God-Bearers do ... They make God real. They nurture within them the gift of grace, and birth goodness into this world – giving life to those ready to receive such a gift.

Just like Mary.

Mary — the one who mothered the divine; the one blessed with the overwhelming task of birthing the Christ. For this reason, Christians long ago bestowed upon her the title *Theotokos* — Bearer of God.

As we remember today on this fourth Sunday of Advent, Mary is the woman the Most-High chose to conceive and bear God’s Son. We do not know why God singled out this unwed teenager from the wrong-side-of-the-tracks. She was an unlikely choice to say the least — made all the more unlikely as she had not “known a man.” We can only ponder in our hearts why the Holy One chose this *particular* maiden to be the *Theotokos*, the Bearer of God.

All we know is that Mary had found favor with God, and that this is cause for celebration. In fact, this is the first thing we learn from Gabriel when he appeared to this unsuspecting disciple in the town of Nazareth. “Greetings, favored one!” he says. Or, if we take the Greek text at face-value: “*Rejoice*, favored one! The Lord is with you.”¹ From the beginning of his visit, we know God has sent Gabriel to bring good news of great joy ... although we may be as perplexed as Mary that this good news is of an unplanned pregnancy for an unwed teenager, in an age when this condemned her to a life of shame (at best), or to capital punishment (at worst). To our ears, this fate hardly sounds like a mark of divine blessing.

But in God’s upside down world, this pronouncement was cause for exultation: Rejoice, favored one! For you will conceive and bear a son and he will be called Son of God. Rejoice! Because the Lord will fulfill the promise to a nation aching for redemption. Rejoice! Because God is at work in unlikely people and unlikely places, to bring to birth the long-awaited Messiah ... For nothing is impossible with God.

Yes, this is cause for exultation. So Mary received this good news with great joy. Despite every reasonable excuse, every fearful impulse, she responded with faith and faithfulness: “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.”

Mary consented to conceive and bear this blessing — this child who brings hope to the oppressed and justice to the nations, who delivers the people from bondage and reigns forever over a kingdom of peace. Mary consented to be the *Theotokos*, the one to bear this gift of love to the world.

And so, for forty weeks, she carried this child — nurturing him with defiant courage and unquenchable love, and with the song of hope that swelled within her breast: “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior ...” With every pulse of life, she sensed the heartbeat of God’s new creation; with each flutter of the babe within her womb, she felt the promise of God take shape.

And — finally — after months of waiting, the *Theotokos* bore God to the world. Mary delivered the child destined to disrupt all life ... and not just for the new parents. As we know from the timeless stories —

Christ’s birth astonishes humble shepherds, who are settled into their nightly watch when an angel’s song shatters the silence: “To you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.” At that moment, the shepherds’ world shifts as they behold the babe of

¹ Gabriel greets Mary with the imperative χαίρε (“rejoice”), which was used as a formula of greeting.

Bethlehem and realize that God dwells among them. They return to the field, glorifying and praising God for this Messiah who will scatter the proud and lift up the lowly.

And Christ's birth amazes Anna and Simeon, who meet the holy infant at the Jerusalem temple, and welcome him with a song of praise: "My eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples." The encounter brings peace to these righteous ones, who have long yearned for redemption, and now cradle the one who will fill the hungry with good things.

And, as the Christ Child grows, he disrupts the lives of many unsuspecting disciples, who drop their nets or their mats or their spears when they hear Christ's voice. As Jesus teaches and preaches and heals, the world begins to turn as the promises of God take root and flourish.

This child of Mary transforms the world, and the life of every person who beholds this gift of grace. No one who encounters the Christ can remain unchanged, for they have received good news of great joy.

This is what we celebrate at Christmas: that God dwells among us as the Word-Made-Flesh — a babe like any other babe, yearning to be received into waiting arms. And — because Christ is born into this world — creation witnesses grace, and tastes peace, and practices love, as the world turns, ever-so-slightly, toward God's vision of wholeness. This is the good news of great joy we will proclaim tonight and in the days ahead — as we join our voices with Mary and Simeon and the heavenly choirs to offer our own hymns of praise.

But for now, for this morning, we dwell with the story of the *Theotokos*, and learn from Mary how to bear this gift to the world ...

The 14th Century German Monk, Meister Eckhart, once wrote: "What good is it to me if this eternal birth of the divine Son takes place unceasingly but does not take place within myself? And what good is it if Mary is full of grace if I am not also full of grace? ... This, then, is the fullness of time. When the Son of God is begotten in us."²

Like Mary, we have been blessed with good news of great joy — with the story of God's unquenchable love made manifest in a babe wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger. We have received this gift — not always in ways we can cradle in our arms, but in grace that washes over us at the font and fills us at the table, in grace that takes root within us and blossoms into faith as we nurture it through prayer and fellowship and service. Many of us have received this gift as we've encountered Emmanuel in the least likely places — in prisons or soup kitchens, on wooded trails or crowded trains, or on the rural roads of South India. And, like those who greeted Christ at the manger and the temple and the lakeshore, these glimpses of God have transformed us ...

And now, as we prepare — once again — to *welcome* God into the world, we are called to *bear* God to the world. To respond to this gift, by allowing grace to grow within us until it overflows in acts of peace, hope, joy, and love — acts that reveal God to others.

This may sound like a daunting task — this business of bearing God to the world (Though — I dare say — not nearly as daunting as it must have seemed to the first *Theotokos*). But — unlike Mary, who physically nurtured and birthed the Christ — we need only birth the promise of new life ... by weeping with a friend until tears turn to laughter or serving a meal to those suffering the pangs of hunger; by clinging to hope when others are lost to despair, or offering words of welcome, like those I heard on the lips of my 8-year-old friend, Afrah.

² Meister Eckhart, as quoted in: Michael K. Marsh, "Birthing God — The Feast of the Annunciation," March 25, 2009 (<https://interruptingthesilence.com/2009/03/25/birthing-god-the-feast-of-the-annunciation/>).

And with each proclamation of peace, each gesture of goodwill, we become like Mary — the *Theotokos* — bearing God to a world desperate for good news of great joy. I believe this can be, because God is still at work in unlikely people — including us — for nothing is impossible with God.

As we ready ourselves to welcome Christ into our hearts, our homes, our world, this is our charge: To be a *Theotokos* here and now. To make God real in the life of another. To respond as Mary did — with faith and faithfulness, and great joy: “Let it be with me, according to your word!”

Favored Ones — Let it be with *us* according to God’s word. And may we, too, bear God to the world.