

Psalm 89:1-4, 19-26

89:1 I will sing of your steadfast love, O LORD, forever; with my mouth I will proclaim your faithfulness to all generations.

2 I declare that your steadfast love is established forever; your faithfulness is as firm as the heavens.

3 You said, "I have made a covenant with my chosen one, I have sworn to my servant David:

4 'I will establish your descendants forever, and build your throne for all generations.'" Selah

19 Then you spoke in a vision to your faithful one, and said: "I have set the crown on one who is mighty, I have exalted one chosen from the people.

20 I have found my servant David; with my holy oil I have anointed him;

21 my hand shall always remain with him; my arm also shall strengthen him.

22 The enemy shall not outwit him, the wicked shall not humble him.

23 I will crush his foes before him and strike down those who hate him.

24 My faithfulness and steadfast love shall be with him; and in my name his horn shall be exalted.

25 I will set his hand on the sea and his right hand on the rivers.

26 He shall cry to me, 'You are my Father, my God, and the Rock of my salvation!'

HYMN

"Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence"

At his feet the six-winged seraph,

Cherubim, with sleepless eye,

Veil their faces to the presence,

As with ceaseless voice they cry:

Alleluia, Alleluia,

Alleluia, Lord Most High!

Luke 1:26-38

1:26 In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth,

27 to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary.

28 And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you."

29 But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be.

30 The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God.

31 And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus.

32 He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David.

33 He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."

34 Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?"

35 The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God.

36 And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren.

37 For nothing will be impossible with God."

38 Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her.

“What’s All This About Emmanuel?”

The Rev. Lisa J. Durkee

December 20, 2020

Please be with me in a spirit of prayer: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, Oh Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

I want to thank you all again for the warm welcome I have received throughout this weekend, both in face—or mask to mask meetings—as well as in several emails and of course in the splendid hospitality of the Merrifields. One of the gifts of the past year has been understanding a deep sense of re-call to ministry. With it, and particularly in preparing for worship first with the search committee and then for this morning’s service, I am also grateful for what had become a central spiritual practice of my own while serving as a pastor. On one of the websites I turn to for inspiration, there is a section that includes artwork that has been created in response to the biblical stories of the day. Although I have to admit that it is often the case that my eyes can kind of glaze over when looking at 15th century depictions of the beheading of John the Baptist or other oddly frequent images, there were several images of Mary regarding this morning’s

scripture lessons that struck me. One, in particular, brings home what is one of the most stunning aspects of the story line of Advent for me, and I wonder whether this may be true for any of you, as well.

The angel's appearing to Mary is known as the annunciation, a word only ever used to describe this one moment—this one, absolutely wonder-full moment, in which every sense humanity had of God's being a distant creator who has left humanity to its own bumbling devices disappears. A new favorite painting is by the Korean artist, Woonbo Kim Ki-chang, who died in 2001. In this image, Mary is sitting at the spinning wheel, with a familiar halo wreathing her head. Somehow, her sitting there in such a mundane, such a homely, homey task centered in the worldly business of making clothing is incredibly striking. The holy, the extraordinary, what we now so often call the *supernatural* comes right into her house, in powerful angelic glory. Can you imagine her gasp? Can you imagine the skein of yarn falling from her fingertips as she recoiled in fear? And God so loved that world that God gave her only son so that whoever believed in him would have eternal life. Wow.

You'll see in the bulletin when you have a chance to look at it again the words for the last verse of the beautiful hymn the choir has shared in the past two weeks. When Ann let me know that "Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence" was available to share this morning, given that Nick had included only the first two verses, I understood why this last one had remained on its own. The intensity of the images is almost too much, isn't it? I thought I would share with you the English translation of the Greek text used in the Byzantine liturgy that gave rise to this beautiful song. We'll begin at the beginning, though, so that when we get to the powerful description of the last stanza we may, if we're lucky, be able to put ourselves in Mary's place.

Let all mortal flesh keep silent, and stand with fear and trembling, and in itself consider nothing earthly; for the King of kings and Lord of lords cometh forth to be sacrificed, and given as food to the believers; and there go before Him the choirs of Angels, with every Dominion and Power, the many-eyed Cherubim and the six-winged Seraphim, covering their faces, and crying out the hymn: Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia.

Well, we may have been told not to consider anything earthly, but this moment in Mary's life—and in ours—brings together the fantastic and the most worldly. Emmanuel, God with us is what she is promised, and is what we wait for a sense of—again and again. God knew what humanity needed when Christ was born, and God knows what we need now: Incarnation, of God's love; embodied connection with one another. I think this is one of the reasons that this Advent season is such a difficult one for us, mid-pandemic. I watched mini, in-person reunions among some of you yesterday, and so was struck again at how *worship* of our eternal, powerful, loving god—via Zoom—can seem so odd. Yet, we *are* here, oddly, newly together. Zoom may sometimes disappoint, but maybe we can think of this charged time of waiting to be like a temporary but good connection. It can be something like a switch of AC/DC, when we want to hear music through a plugged-in stereo, but what we can do for the moment is hang in there with our little battery operated transistor radio while we wait for the power to come back on.

I promised myself to write a short sermon, so that we could spend a bit of time sharing our thoughts together in the way you have begun accustomed to sharing. So, I want to have you

think for a moment about what a splendid gift we have in the annunciation: We shift from a sense of anything truly holy being unattainable, being otherworldly, to the fundamentally natural and human as human can be birth of a child. Angels, the stuff of dreams and folklore, speak to Mary and to Joseph and to the shepherds, and they share the incredible news: Christ will be born to us. We are waiting again for the gift of God's presence, which has never left us but can sometimes be lost in the spinning wheel, or the spinning tires, or the snow deeper and heavier than this week's beautiful storm. We know God's presence here with us as we gather in Spirit—never really distant from one another, though we see only temporary images for now. This is the season of invitation. So, I invite you to hear a poem from John of the Cross, the Spanish saint of the 16th century well-known for his poetry. This is a translation by *Daniel Ladinsky*.

*If you want, the Virgin will come walking down the road
pregnant with the holy and say,
"I need shelter for the night, please take me inside your heart,
my time is so close."*

*Then, under the roof of your soul,
you will witness the sublime intimacy,
the divine, the Christ, taking birth forever,
as she grasps your hand for help,
for each of us is the midwife of God, each of us.
Yes there, under the dome of our being
does creation come into existence eternally,
through your womb, dear pilgrim
– the sacred womb of your soul,
as God grasps our arms for help:
for each of us is his beloved servant, never far.
If you want, the Virgin will come
walking down the street
pregnant with Light and sing.*

Amen!