

“Teenage Faith”
Rev. Dr. Richard Topping
Christmas Eve Service
December 24, 2022

It was a Saturday afternoon before the Sunday performance of the children's pageant. I would go to the rehearsal. I always gave the benediction at the end of the pageant after the children acted out their various parts the whole task, came up front then the minister climbed into the crèche scene with Mary and Joseph and shepherds and the angels and says the benediction “and now made the whole peace and joy and love of Christmas be yours now and always”. I enjoy my part in the pageant every year even though there's no minister in the Bible.

I always got a speaking part and I was the tallest one. But one year I was playing my role as I had for seven years now and at the end of a dress rehearsal, I climbed into the Manger, dressed in ministerial attire with the Angel Gabriel and said the benediction. After I said it one of the little shepherds looked up at me like this and I, I still remember, he said, “is that all you're going to say?” He said it in a way that made me feel like my brief benediction was well hardly worth getting dressed up for.

I took it that he was looking for something more substantially, seemed to be suggesting that this was a big event and maybe the minister could come up with something more than a, like a measly benediction. The whole pageant by degrees led to this high moment when the entire cast is up front singing their hearts out ‘come and behold him, born the king of angels’ and then the anti- climactic reverend gives a weak benediction “that's all you're gonna say?” I felt under prepared. I had no answer so I did what I always do when I have no answer, I smiled.

Friends, Christmas is wonderful, it's a high, holy and exciting time of the year. God comes amongst us in Jesus Christ conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary. And for various reasons children seemed to be alive to this time of the year in a way that sometimes we adults don't quite belong. Christmas creates big expectations. Children at the pageant right they ask those gynecological questions every year that are hard to answer. How did this happen? why did God do that?

And we keep stoking wonder and creating all in our children like putting them in a pageant here at the church. We alert our children to the fact that the universe is open to God's activity, that possibility and big moves are being worked on the universe by God.

We nurture children to expect that God acts and moves and is alive in the world and the surprisingly, the utterly delightful thing is that they are open to it and they take to heart. And when you're an adult you bear more responsibility for making Christmas happen and sometimes that puts a bit of a damper on your sense of wonder, doesn't it!

But more than that, we're kind of familiar with Christmas, I mean how many times we've been through this before. Wonderful things can almost become a routine. We've been around the advent wreath a few times, the days come and gone before Christmas is just part of a well ordered life and it comes and goes and glad tidings of great joy can be cynical chidings of incredible, boredom.

The tree comes out-of-the-box, the tree goes into the box. Orange is the colour of the branches, of the bottom blue, in the middle green the top they go back in the box as it came out of the box with the green sticks with the holes in them at the bottom. Will do it in next year, Christmas is part of a pattern we've institutionalized, commercialized, routinized the visitation of God amongst us. It's Christmas at wants. One of the leading poets of our time, Wendell Berry says that, when he faces the Bible that reads the Bible he always faces temptation. When he reads, those bits that don't sit well with him. At first he says, the gospel stands at the opening of a mystery in which our lives are deeply, dangerously, and inescapably involved.

This should make us wary of any attempt to reduce faith to a rhythmic role of judgments and explanations too familiar talk about God. We should fear foreclosing on reality or reducing it to some simply human estimate. And so God sends an Angel to Mary. Artists just love to portray the Annunciation. Young Mary is probably a teenager, she's raised in Judaism her expectations about what's possible come from her reading of the Torah. She learns her whole short life long about God's love for Israel. The Prophetic yearning, the hope for Messiah. But I sometimes wonder if God picks Mary for the special task of bearing Messiah because she's a teenager.

In these days across North America there's an absence of teenagers in church, and here at the heart of the Christmas story is a young woman in the awkward gangly lanky self-conscious stage of adolescence, and God sends an Angel to Mary to secure her cooperation, to call her into the service of the word of God. Hail! favored one! that's what the Angel said. Now why on earth a teenager? I have had teenagers.

Well in some ways, only God knows. And yet, yet here's what I wonder. I wonder reading her response whether it's because teenagers in my experience they tend to be more open to the bizarre and the unusual. Teenagers haven't always yet settled for the so-called facts as we narrowly defined them by Economists or people in Lab coats.

The world hasn't jelled and hardened and set yet around just the things that could be touched and tasted and seen. I think sometimes we imagine that Mary is sort of like Charlotte Church you know at the Met. I think we should be thinking it's more like Greta Thunberg at the UN, more like Janis Joplin it would stop belting out times they are changing. One thing I've noticed about teenagers: is that they do have this high tolerance, even a desire for the weird. Teenagers see something weird and unlike me I want to do a study, usually kill it, and dissect it to see how it happens. But my son says, hey! that's weird, let's try it.

Most adolescents have more curiosity and playfulness than those of us who have settled for a stable and fixed version of the way that life has got to be. Seems to me that the God who is interested in new life and the new creation that God works well with those teenage inclinations. Of course Mary is just perplexed at the greeting of Gabriel the Angel says, "fear not", I wonder if it helped. But Mary carries on a conversation with the Angel. She even discusses the rudimentary facts of human biology with Gabriel. And is always teenagers no more than we think they know about sex how can this be I'm a virgin. Now who can blame him for asking? she's not married to Joseph; she's engaged, she's a young woman without any particular education or preparation. Of course when you get called by God she's got questions to the whole Bible there are questions, but Mary notice does not laugh a cynical act. She doesn't dismiss the Angel with it. Her questions are about possibility how, how can this be? and the Angel talks about God's action in the world the Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the most

high will over shadow you therefore the child to be born will be holy, you'll be call him the son of God and then the Angel says this, for nothing it will be impossible with God.

And that's a really a hard saying for most of us. Most of us, grown up people we don't resort to language about God when something impossible is before us. We crunch the numbers, we consult statistics, we look for benchmarks and set up possible scenarios and we worry. We worry about wars, we worry about climate change, we worry about sickness, we worry about exhaustion, we think sometimes in the time like this when it's tough that, let's not have that talk about God enough thoughts and prayers and all.

We think it's maybe misplaced piety that somehow to talk about God is no answer at all. It's an enigma wrapped up in a mystery we want to make the promise of a son to the Virgin Mary. Sometimes metaphorical, symbolic, find a way of squaring it with the facts as we've settled them as we know them so that changes all up to us we. We lack teenage imagination and faith. Ours is a Protestantism, says Nancy Meyers with all the mystery scrubbed out of it, by a vigorous and slightly vinegary reason. But look at what Mary does, her teenage move is the opposite of most of us have just gotten settled for the way it is. Mary's view of the world gets blown apart, but hadn't been on her radar until now, seems possible. The revelation of God's plan for her and for this world weakens her mind to a world that she could never see before and listen to the song she sings about a topsy-turvey world where the poor are lifted up and the humbled helped by God and she leans in, that sounds a lot like Janis Joplin.

She answered simply, and elegantly "here I am, the servant of the Lord let it be done with me according to your word. Mary accepts the call, she simply says yes to this impossible possibility. God keeps his promise to God's people, God sends Jesus Christ our savior and Mary gets swept up to what God is doing in the World. M prayer for all of us tonight is that that happens to us too. Amen!