"CHRISTMAS LIST: IV – JOY"
Karen F. Bunnell
Elkton United Methodist Church
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4th Sunday of Advent

Luke 1:26-38

One year, right before Christmas, drivers preparing to go through the Lincoln Tunnel to get into New York City, looked up and saw a new billboard on display. On it was a nativity scene, and the words across it read, "You know it's a myth." As those same drivers came out the other side of the tunnel in the city, they saw another billboard directly in front of them. On that billboard was also a nativity scene, but on **that** billboard the words sprawled across it read, "You know it's real."

The first billboard had been put there by a society of atheists, the second by a church. The first billboard's implication was "this season, celebrate reason." In other words, don't buy that silly story. Don't buy that whole baby born in a manger, Savior of the world stuff. Think about it – it doesn't make sense.

Fleming Rutledge, a wonderful teacher of preachers, reflecting on that said, "I revere reason as much as the atheists do – up to a point. But what faith knows is that although reason is a gift, it is not a god. Reason cannot explain everything. Certainly it cannot explain the purposes and promises of God." (On-line, Fleming Rutledge, "Magnificat," Generous Orthodoxy.com)

She's right. Reason can't explain everything, but if we're not careful, we let it explain away a lot, we let it keep us from believing that which we cannot scientifically prove. Everyone of us has to make a choice about what we believe at Christmas and always, actually. We have to make a choice to limit our beliefs based on reason, or to open ourselves to the possibility that God is greater than that.

Mary had to make that choice as well. When that angel appeared to her and told her astonishing news – that she would bear the Savior of the world – she had to choose. She could have dismissed the opportunity because it was not reasonable, it didn't make worldly sense; or she could embrace it trusting that God is greater than human reason.

The wonderful writer Madeline L'Engle wrote:

"This is the irrational season,
When love blooms bright and wild.

Had Mary been filled with reason
There'd have been no room for the Child."

My friends, in this fourth and final week of our journey through Advent, after we've looked at the journeys of John the Baptist and Joseph the carpenter, today there is one more journey to consider – and that is Mary's – Mary's journey to "yes."

You all know her story. She was young, some experts say in her mid-teens. Her parents had made her a perfectly good match with Joseph, a carpenter. They were betrothed, they were making plans for a good, solid future together. Everything was going along just fine, until that fateful day when the angel Gabriel came to her and turned her world upside down. He called her "favored one" and told her what that meant – that she would bear a child by the Holy Spirit, and He would be God's only Son, sent to set God's people free.

The scripture says that Mary was perplexed – no kidding! Even after the angel tried to reassure her, Mary's reply, I think, reflects her tender age. It was very practical. "Well, how can that be, since I have not been with a man?" She just hasn't yet wrapped her mind around the fact that this was not something about which she could reason.

Still, Gabriel was patient with her and explained further what was to happen. Frederick Buechner, a wonderful writer and preacher speculated about what Gabriel might have been thinking about when he told Mary not to be afraid. He wrote: "'You mustn't be afraid, Mary,' he said. And as he said it, he only hoped she wouldn't notice that beneath the great, golden wings, he himself was trembling with fear to think that the whole future of creation hung now on the answer of a girl.'" (Frederick Buechner, *Peculiar Treasures,* p. 39).

It was a tense moment, on which indeed hung so much. Mary needed reassurance and Gabriel offered it with words of peace, and a word about her cousin Elizabeth who, amazingly, despite her advanced age, was also to bear a child. And somehow, in the midst of all that, Mary steps beyond the bounds of reason into the realm of belief and trust – and she says "yes."

Then she goes to see her cousin Elizabeth and Elizabeth affirms it all – the blessing, the promise, the hope of the world – and Mary knew her "yes" was right, and her heart soared with joy. What a journey! She literally sings a song of joy to the Lord – we call it the Magnificat.

"My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior. For He has regarded the low estate of his handmaiden. For behold, henceforth all generations will call me blessed, for he who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name." (Luke 1:46-49)

Mary's is an amazing journey of faith, a journey that lead to complete joy – joy, mind you that wasn't always happiness and roses, because her journey lead through some dark times – but a journey that always, always found its center and its peace in God.

When I thought about what it was that made Mary so joy-filled at this moment in her life, I thought about three things. First, Mary was filled with joy because God had something for her to do – something just for her to do – something that He wanted only her to do. He had a special calling on her life.

Pastor Jon Walton, in a sermon on Mary, says that one of the greatest things any of us can know in life is that we have something to offer the world that it needs just from us. He says, "that God's grace is boundless, abundant, and full of surprises, and there isn't a better thing in life than to be able to give something to the world that it needs." (On-line, Jon Walton, "Magnificat," Dec. 2011)

Mary knew that because Gabriel told her, and Elizabeth told her, and finally, she truly understood it herself. God had called her, and her alone, to bear His child into the world – a child that the world desperately needed. God called her – her – and realizing that, and taking up that mantle, Mary was filled with joy.

But she was also filled with joy I think, because she realized how much God believed in her. From all outward appearances His choice didn't seem to make a whole lot of sense – a teenage girl, a girl betrothed to be married, a girl who wasn't used to the slings and arrows that could come from others, a girl who had been sheltered first by her father, then by her fiancée. It didn't make sense to her, but it made sense to God. Clearly, God believed she could do it, God believed in her, and clearly, that filled Mary with joy.

And because God believed in her, Mary believed in herself.

And thirdly, and perhaps most importantly of all, Mary was joyful because she knew that God would be with her all along the way, wherever it would go. In a beautiful reflection on what Mary was feeling, Barbara Brown Taylor writes, "The only thing that is absolutely sure in this scenario is that we have a partner who is with us and for us and who wants us to have life. Mary's trust in that fact is really all she has. What she does not have is a sonogram, or a husband, or an affidavit from the Holy Spirit that says, 'This child really is mine. Now leave the poor girl alone.' All she has is her unreasonable willingness to believe that the God who has chosen her will be part of whatever happens next – and that, apparently, is enough to make her burst into song. She does not wait to see how things will turn out. She sings ahead of time, and all the angels with her." (Barbara Brown Taylor, "Singing Ahead of Time," *Home By Another Way,* p. 18).

Mary sings with joy because she has answered the call to do something that the world really needs, because God believes in her, and because she believes that God will be with her through it all. Her story really is an amazing, amazing story, and, friends, her story is our story as well.

Because still, today, God is in the calling business. As a matter of fact, He has something for each of us to do – we simply need to listen to hear what it is. And when we hear, when one day we hear from an angel in our sleep (which still does happen), or we feel a stirring in our spirit, or a sudden urge to do something we had never considered before – may you and I respond as did Mary, and may we learn from her story.

May we know, like Mary, that there is nothing better in the world than to be able to give to the world something that it needs – that only we can give. When I was reflecting on this point, and reading again Mary's story, I couldn't help but think of a young woman who has been in the news a lot the past few years. Her name is Malala Yousefzai. Many of you may know her story. Malala is from Pakistan and she was born in 1997. When she was just 12 years old, she became an activist advocating for education for all children. You see, the Taliban was fighting that – especially limiting access to education for girls. Malala took up the cause, and wrote about it, and drew the attention of filmmakers, who recorded her story.

The Taliban got wind of it and began threatening her – a 12 year old girl – and on October 9, 2012, at the tender age of 14, as she was riding home from school on a bus, members of the Taliban boarded the bus and shot her at point blank range. She was critically injured and because of international efforts, her life was saved.

And now, she goes around the world advocating for education for all children, and was even nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize. Hers is an amazing story, and one night, a couple of months ago, I saw Malala on the Daily Show with Jon Stewart. I don't know how many of you watch that, but sometimes Jon Stewart has quite an edge to him. Not that night. Malala began to tell her story, and at one point, Stewart asked her if she had known that the Taliban had targeted her. She said that she had discovered that, and she often thought to herself what she would do if they came after her. She said that first she thought that if one of them came after her, she would take off her shoe and hit him, and then she thought, "No, that would make me no better than him." Instead, she said, I would talk to him and tell him how important it is to go to school, and I would tell him that every child has a right to an education, even his." After she said those words, Jon Stewart was so moved, he couldn't speak. He wiped away tears from his eyes, and then in a sweet and charming way, told her he wanted to adopt her. (Jon Stewart, The Daily Show, October 9, 2013)

Now, there is a person who has found joy in knowing that she has something to give the world that they really need. Friends, you don't have to be like Mary, or even like Malala, you just have to be you, and know that God has something for you to do, and He has given you what you need to do it. It won't be bearing the Savior of the world, and it may not be being a worldwide advocate for education, but there will be something or some things that God wants and needs you to do.

When you sense what that is, remember that you can do it because God believes in you. As one pastor put it "The good news of the gospel is that when God begins to look for us, God is not looking for perfection. God chooses the ordinary. God loves the unlovable. In fact, God reverses just about every expectation we might have of how God would enter into this world and save it.' (On-line, Kenneth Carter, "Call and Response)

My friends, just as God chose Mary, God will choose you as well. He believes in you – may you learn to believe in yourself. And may you know, most of all, that no matter what God calls you to do or where God calls you to go, He will be with you every step of the way – and it will be okay.

I close with challenging words from a pastor named David Lose, who invites us to look around at each other in the congregation, and realize that all of us are people favored by God, "through whom God plans to do marvelous things. Perhaps not conceive and bear the Son of God, but so what (he says) – that one's been done already anyway! But think how many other wonderful things there are that God wants to accomplish through us, so many that you and I couldn't begin to count them all!" (On-line, David Lose, "Favored Ones," December, 2011).

So, favored ones, listen - for God has something to say to you, and something for you to do. When He calls, like Mary, say "yes," and know joy! May it be so.

Amen.