

**State College Presbyterian Church
Rev. Dr. Charles Curley
December 13, 2009
Third Sunday in Advent
"God in a Baby's Hand"
From the song by John Bell
of the Iona Community**

**Micah 5:2-5
Luke 2:1-7**

**God in a Baby's Hand:
Obscurity
". . . Mary, his betrothed, who was with child."
Luke 2:5**

The wonder of the Third Sunday in Advent is not just that God "became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth . . ." as the Gospel of John puts it, though heaven knows that would be enough to both absorb and celebrate.

The true wonder is that God chose to be born in obscurity.

That God chose to be born to a nobody from no place.

Mary. Betrothed and with child.

The wonder of the Christmas Story as Luke tells us is that it is so mundane, so ordinary, so obscure.

As obscure as Mary.

Mary.

What do we know about Mary.

She is so obscure, as the history of this world goes, that the biographical information supplied by the gospel is limited to these few words:

"Luke 1:26-27"

That's it!

She was from Nazareth.

She was betrothed to Joseph.

Mathew and Luke both give us long genealogies of Joseph – tracing his ancestry way back through time.

But of Mary, the Bible offers no more details.

Oh, one more detail.

She was a “virgin.”

The church has spent generations arguing about the meaning of the theological concept “the Virgin Birth.”

Arguing the doctrine which arose from Luke using that word to describe Mary.

I do not intend to revisit that complex theological argument today.

Instead, I will assume that in this case Luke meant to use the word “virgin” in the fullness of the common uses we make of that word:

-- unspoiled, unmarked, not diluted, pure as at the moment of creation.

Like virgin timber, virgin snow, virgin wool, virgin persons.

You see, I don't want to make too much out of Mary's virginity, because Luke does not.

Luke just mentions it casually along with her birthplace and her betrothal, in a matter-of-fact sort of way.

Through the centuries, the church has struggled to explain why someone as obscure as Mary was chosen.

And the Bible does not say.

So the church has made some assumptions – without any Biblical support whatsoever – and church tradition has loaded on this ordinary young girl many virtues, including her own miraculous birth, for no reason other than the church's desire to find something extraordinary about her which would demonstrate why Mary was chosen by God above all others!

But that is the exact point Luke is trying to make!

That there is nothing extraordinary about Mary at all!

Luke's description of her is, in fact, completely ordinary.

A young, betrothed, virgin girl from the backwoods hill town of Nazareth, with the very common name, Mary (in Hebrew Mir-yam, aka Miriam).

The most common name in her time – from Moses' sister Miriam.

So, if it was not something about Mary's background or birth that made her special enough for the "Word to become flesh" through her, perhaps it was her personality.

Was she the most gentle? Most spiritual? Most pious of young women?

Nope. Luke says nothing about outstanding personal qualities.

Luke says nothing about why Mary would become the living cradle of the light of the world!

She was just an untouched, unprepared, virgin living space for the spirit of God.

"And she gave birth to her first-born son and laid him in a manger. . ."

". . . and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us."

Why Mary? Rather than some other virgin from Nazareth?

The reason is that there is no reason why Mary. It could have happened to any woman.

Luke's message is startling!

Mary was an ordinary woman, not special in any particular way more than any other woman.

An ordinary virgin, from an obscure town, betrothed to a common ordinary man.

Luke's startling message is that it is not because of Mary that light came into the world in Jesus Christ – it is because of God!

The one who acts in an extraordinary way is God – who chooses an ordinary young woman in an obscure place for this extraordinary event.

It is God who chooses to enter into the virgin life of Mary (remember our definition of virgin).

It is God who chooses to enter into the unprepared, untouched, unremarkable life of Mary – to be born into our world, to bring light to our world, to become flesh

and dwell among us, so we can behold his glory, the “Glory as of the only Son of God,” through Mary, obscure, ordinary Mary.

The wonder of Luke’s story is that God’s glory works through very ordinary folks in very obscure places:

Mary, Joseph and shepherds,

Bethlehem and Nazareth,

stable and manger.

God works then, and God works now, through ordinary people in obscure places.

People like us. Places like this.

God wants to be born in us, here and now.

God’s light wants to shine into our lives this Christmas.

We don’t deserve it. But neither did Mary.

We aren’t ready for it. But neither was Mary.

But that’s just the point!

It’s God who is ready – even when we are not.

Let us, like Mary, unprepared as we are, open our lives to the living presence of the Spirit of God, light to the world, that we too, in our darkness, might behold the Glory of his light, and touch God in a baby’s hand.

Amen.