

North Main, 12.24.17

Advent4ArrivalOfJNM122417

Title: *Finally*

Texts: Luke 1:26-38. Scripture reading: Psalm 89:1-4

The first recorded date of Christmas being celebrated on December 25 is 336, during the time of the Roman Emperor Constantine, who was the first *Christian* Emperor. A few years later, Pope Julius I officially declared that the birth of Jesus would be celebrated on that day. From Rome, Jesus' Nativity celebration spread to other Christian churches. Soon most Christians were celebrating Christ's birth on December 25. For nearly 1700 years, the Christian church has been celebrating Jesus' birth on the same day.

And for longer than that we humans have been waiting for Jesus' return. While waiting, mere humans have been plotting and proposing the time and place for that concluding event. But so far every prediction and prognosticator has been wrong. We're still here, celebrating Jesus' birth, waiting for his return. We're still living in the *meantime*, between first and second coming. We're caught in the middle. Still believing. Sometimes, when considering what I stake my life on, I echo Mary's words: "How can this be?"

In this immediate meantime, Christmas 2017, we have been busy: shopping, attending Christmas parties and family gatherings, cooking and baking, decorating Christmas trees, putting up lights, planning worship services. These endeavors define and add meaning to the season. However, for some, busyness leaves little time to reflect on the story that is the foundation for Christmas.

Here, paraphrased, is that narrative. Gabriel was sent to Nazareth with a message: *Mary, the Lord is with you. Don't be afraid. God approves of you, has chosen you. You're going to have a son. You are to name him Jesus. To his influence there will be no end.*

Mary, seemingly fearless, confronts God's messenger angel: *Wait, what. I've never been with a man. So how can this be?*

Gabriel again: *Your pregnancy will take place through the power of the holy spirit, who will place the seed of birth in your womb And the one whom you will carry and birth is the incarnation of God. He will be God's son.*

Mary again: *Ok. Here I am. Ready to serve. Let it be with me just as you say.* Then Gabriel made his exit, leaving Mary pregnant, young and wondering.

I have the same question as Mary: How can this be? How is it that this young woman, after being visited by an angel, living in a culture that would have despised her for being pregnant and unmarried, bearing the weight of God's intentions, how is it that this young woman was so composed? So accepting so consensual? And how can it be that you and I continue to believe such an unusual, untenable story.

And pushing this out even further, how is it that we continue to hold this story as true and legitimate. We believe this narrative even when faced with criticism for doing so. How is it that we continue to stake our faith and reputation on this debated and doubted passage of Scripture.

How is it that we confess the birth of Jesus as the beginning of our faith, while waiting for his return as the end of our faith?

Remember my friend Jack, from a couple of weeks ago, who was a bit like John the Baptist: cranky, brusque, straightforward, a little crude, a lot profane. Jack accepted the American God, but Jesus not so much: “You believe that angels told a virgin she was pregnant. By the holy spirit, no less. Another angel, in a dream, told her dense husband the same thing. And they both believed it. And the baby was God’s son. You’re out of your mind! You’re as dense as Joseph.” Then chuckling, shaking his head, mumbling, he returned to pulling levers, making parts.

That’s what we believe, you know—while a growing number do not. In college, Marion Bontrager challenged us: “You are in a shrinking minority because of the way you read Scripture and what you believe about Jesus. For your beliefs to be credible, you have to ask yourself why you’re in the minority? You have to ask yourself whether the majority is right, and is that why others are in the majority and you’re not. You have to ask yourself if you’re wrong?”

Mary asked “How can this be?” Sometimes I ask the same question. How can it be, that I believe in a virgin birth, God come to earth in an infant? How can it be that I believe that this infant grew up to be Jesus, the resurrected Christ, whom I try to pattern my life after? How can it be, that I believe that one day this same person, this infant all grown up, will return? It would be easy to say, “It’s what I was taught as a child.” It would be easy to punch the default button, “Well, everyone believes in something, and this is what I believe.” It would be easy to say, “I’m a pastor in a Christian context, so of course I believe in Jesus.”

While all true, none of those answers completely satisfied me on Thursday afternoon. So, I leaned back in my chair with this question: Why do I believe what I believe about Jesus? Two weeks ago, I referenced a Wednesday night study where we made two lists: “Christmas of the Mall” and “Christmas of the Manger.” On the left side, we listed things like: Santa Clause, Rudolph, the North Pole and Elves. Mariah said that column calls for belief in magic. In the right column, we listed things like: prophecy of Jesus’ birth, Mary’s dream, Joseph’s dream, the Bethlehem birth, angels, shepherds, visitors with gifts. We determined that the right column called for belief and faith in a relationship.

God wants a relationship with us. And that happens through Jesus. And that relationship requires belief, faith. And that relationship changed my life. And that relationship continues to inform my life, beliefs and faith.

“Let it be to me as you say.” How did young Mary, given all that she faced, arrive at that statement? Listen to what happens when I link two verses from the morning texts: “Your faithfulness is as firm as the heavens” (Psalm 89:2); “May it be to me as you have said” (Luke 1:38). Mary’s statement depicts the faith and belief of the psalmist, which would have been part of her Bible. When reading the birth narratives in Matthew and Luke, I conclude that Mary (and Joseph) had a relationship with God, a faith as “firm as the heavens.” How else could they believe that Messiah was *finally* coming, through them no less? How else can we *finally* believe

this story and believe that Jesus—some day—is *finally* coming back?

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