

Sermon by Vicar Tamika Jancewicz
 December 24, 2017
 Advent 4
 Luke 1:26 – 36

A young adolescent teenage girl wearing a grey hoodie and jeans, is gazing out into a parking lot, holding her now growing and perfectly round belly, as she sits on a broken, deteriorating, hard, mechanical pony that has been neglected and unused for years. She is waiting, it seems, for a young man, with the name tag José, who is intently listening to someone on one of those ancient things that used to be called a payphone, and in his one hand is a **gasp** phone book, as the other hand rests in his jean pocket, possibly holding on to some change for the next phone call. The two are right in front of a liquor store, in the rain, awaiting something important—perhaps an answer on the other end of the phone call of where they can stay. And in the background a motel flashes its light “No vacancy” with the usual ad of “Free HBO here.” Everything is grey, a bit gloomy. Except for this small glowing plant that has pushed itself out of the concrete jungle that it resides in and is sprouting despite the empty beer cans, bottles, and trash that surround it along the unwelcoming ground from which it now must grow. There is still life here.

This somewhat gloomy but ominous picture has been circulating on my Facebook page for the past couple of weeks and it is entitled “José and Maria” by the artist Everett Patterson, and it is his modern day depiction of Jesus’ parents right before he was born. Patterson drew this image in 2014, and used it as the front of his Christmas cards that year. Could you imagine what people thought when they received that card?

Think of how different most of our Christmas cards adorning the Holy Nativity scene usually looks. Who is Mary, what does she look like, and what is her status?

In our gospel reading for today, we meet this Mary, the mother of Jesus and we try to fathom how Mary must have felt, and looked like when she encounters the angel Gabriel, when he comes to her and calls her “favored” and then says, “so look you’re going to have a baby. But not just any baby, he’s going to be great. A descendent of King David. He’s going to reign over the descendants of Jacob, AND his kingdom will be everlasting” She replies, “How can this be, I am a virgin?”

Yea...how can this be?

So often when we reach our last Sunday of Advent we are so ready to get to the birth part, our Nativity Scenes are waiting to be dusted off, and placed just so. In most of our scenes, Mary is blissfully sitting by the side of her child, while Joseph stands by. There are usually some shepherds, and wisemen, and even in some a drummer boy, who is not at all in the biblical text but it’s a good story to tell. Growing up, starting on Christmas eve until Christmas day, a small church near my house used to do a live nativity scene and you could go by and look at the people trying not to move, and look as cold as it really was—and for the record the baby was not real. But in all of these scenes, all is well with the world, and we sing songs of joy because we made it through Advent. We waited, patiently for this glorious day. And how amazingly

awesome that we don't have to wait another Sunday to start our first day of Christmas celebration, because that's tomorrow y'all! Are we ready?

But wait...let's go back to the scene that Everett Patterson drew for us.

What is up with this less than appealing depiction of our happy baby Jesus story? Why is it important for us to see the nature for which Mary truly had that holy son of God in this way as Patterson depicts? Our artist explains it this way, "I have a small hope that this Christmas image will come to mind when we see other 'down and out' people huddling outside gas stations, reminding us that our Saviour's parents (and indeed, Jesus himself) were at one time similarly troubled."

I think Patterson is on to something here.

When we think of the way that Jesus came to us. How God decided to come to us in human form in our messy, broken, and beautiful world. We can imagine then how God still chooses and will choose to bring this blessed holiness into our broken form, for us, for all of us. We encounter Jesus again and again, as the least of these.

Think of this: God comes to us — like God does in so many ways throughout the biblical text, and in our own lives—in a poor, low, and unassuming place through the womb of a poor, low, and unassuming young girl, whose life did not fashion that of a royalty and power. Instead God chose to bring the holy one among us in a way that is so questionable and yet so mysterious at the same time. And along with Mary who is perhaps confused, maybe shocked, and/or just all-out amazed at this whole thing that Gabriel is saying to her, we gaze at this holy saviour not yet but already born and say "How can this be"

Could it be that when we fathom the fullness of who Mary is, and why God chose such a person to enter into to life with and among us, that we can then fathom the fullness of Gabriel's response to her that "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."

What a blessed miracle!! A holy child! Son of God! In this place? To that woman?

Mary sings about such divine grace later on in this chapter of Luke, and she reminds us that God has blessed her. That God has blessed us. And that God continues to tip the unbalanced scale of normality, and counters what is wrong in the world. Her words tell us that God has mercy to those who have a reverence for God. God scatters the proud in the thoughts of their hearts, brings down the powerful, and lifts up the lowly. God satisfies those who hunger with good things, and the rich who have everything is sent away empty-handed.

Mary's praise reminds us that God's holy presence and the Spirit that comes upon her, and ultimately all of us, brings forth a new order, a new reign of justice where justice is so desperately needed. A new way of peace, where peace seems great in theory but is not quite a real tangible feeling for some. A new love where love can often seem like an empty word. And a hope that gives all of us something more to look forward to.

And so I'd like us all to imagine then, that as we reach our first day of Christmas, tomorrow, and end our last day of Advent today, and the time in between...

That the Holy Spirit will come upon Maria in Puerto Rico. A place ruled by empire, still desperate for hope and a need for redemption. Overtaxed and underrepresented. That the Son of God will be birthed there, giving hope for a new reign, and better life. A time of restoration.

Let's envision that the Holy Spirit will come upon the young woman whose family is here, in our country, without documents, but she herself born here, or maybe just raised here from a very young age—A dreamer. That those who fear deportation and isolation, will find comfort in knowing God does not give up on their dreams, and hopes. And that God's reign will overshadow the reign of those who have the power to send them away.

Let's consider that the Holy Spirit will come upon a young refugee, whose family is in desperate need of a home. A place of their own, because they can no longer be in the place they used to call home. And that the Son of God will be present there to those uncertain and forgotten places that are ignored, refused shelter, refused sanctuary, and refused human dignity.

Let's wonder what it would be like if the Holy Spirit came upon a Flint, Michigan resident or someplace like it, where clean water is a luxury, and people's health are being affected due to neglect and inaction of those in power. And the presence of this holy son brings a promise of a real tangible promise of clean and health for all human kind.

Because God has shown us that God loves us so much that God will go to the deepest crevices of our cracked and shattered humanity to reach us all. Yes, in the very real, flawed, and beautiful form of a human being. Like us.

That at the same time that God is showing up in the low places, God is showing up here with us. That when we see Mary ready to give birth any day now, because she was chosen among many, to give birth to someone so great, so marvelous, in such desperate and uncertain times, we see that what we ultimately need is right there. Right here.

So let's go back to Jose and Maria—the image I described in the beginning. The couple still looks like they are desperate need of something. When we look at them, are we going to move towards them? Are we seeing what God has shown us? Are we seeing what God sees? Slow down. Take it in. Because here. There. A miracle is being birthed. A chance of redemption is being revealed.

The Holy Spirit has come, is coming, will come. A holy birth is coming, has come, will come. And The Son of God is present. Here. Among us. Among ALL of us. And that's worth praising God for. Amen.