

Moving through the Perplexity of Christmas
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December 20, 2020 - Advent 4



O come all ye faithful. O come let us adore Him, Christ the Lord!

Well, good morning on this Advent 4 Sunday. We are on the home stretch toward Christmas and into the home stretch of ending the year 2020. I don't know about you, but I've seen enough of 2020 and its accompanying 320,000 COVID deaths. I know that 2021 has got to be a better year. I am claiming it to be so in Jesus' name. I know we are a progressive community of faith, but somebody knows what I'm talking about when I claim healing and purpose for our land, for our country and for ourselves in 2021. Amen.

Our scripture this morning is Luke 1:26-38

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" The angel said to her, "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. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God." Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her.

The word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

Advent is a season of waiting and preparation. Every year about this time, we prepare for the Holy One to reappear in our lives. We prepare ourselves to receive the sacred gift of life, that was laid in a manger on that first Christmas morning. We wait, and we wait. We wait and we prepare for the spirit to fall afresh on us and to direct us in life changing ways.

If we are open to receiving the Holy One, She will appear. Angels and divine messengers are all around us. We don't have to be elders or seasoned saints in order to be used of God. Mary was a teenager when the angel Gabriel came to her and shared that she was about to be blessed in a way she never imagined and certainly in a way she didn't ask for. Gabriel told Mary she would soon be pregnant and give birth to the Son of God. Yes, Mary was perplexed at this one. It made no sense. Who was this character? Why was he talking to her? And, how was she going to have a baby when she was not yet married? All very good questions.

If we are honest, there have been times in our lives when we were directed by the spirit or perhaps even by angels to pursue a path that made no sense. How can this be Mary asked? We too are perplexed when directed toward an unknown path. When I was wrestling with my call to ministry, I was being directed toward a path where I had no roll models. And it didn't make sense. Why me? Why was I feeling this huge pull toward a vocation I had never seen another Black woman serve in? I knew the path would be bumpy and enduring bigotry and sexist nasty comments from women and men didn't sound like a good time to me. Even as a neophyte evangelist, I knew the economics for women in ministry were not good. Financial planning has always been important to me. It made no sense to be directed toward this path. I was perplexed.

Why me? Why you? Why were you led into social work, to care for those who were lost, lonely, and left out? Why were you led to volunteer at a food bank when you could be resting in retirement? Why were you driven to the medical field and to advocate for the marginalized when you could have done something much easier? Why are you compelled to support LGBTQ+ youth when touring with an RV would be really sweet? Why are you moved to give away more and more of your money now instead of giving it to your family at your death.

Why? Because the broken-hearted need to hear a word of hope now. And those in prisoned in body, mind, and spirit, need to hear they are free now in Jesus' name.

Womanist Hebrew bible scholar Dr. Renita Weems, asked the question in her landmark book, *Just a Sister Away*, how do we receive a blessing that causes more problems than they solve? My response is, we receive the blessing knowing that if God brought us to it, then God will bring us through it. Mary said, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” It was a bumpy road for Mary from Jesus' conception, to his birth in a barn, all the way through Jesus' death on the cross. It wasn't easy for Mary. She was perplexed from the beginning and still she trusted God. Mary said, “here I am God. Use me.” When we get to a bump in our journey, we have to say once again, here I am God. Use me. Not just get me out of here, but here I am. Use me.

I continue to hear Pastor Sam Kim's sermon from the first Sunday in Advent saying that Jesus was not sent to the world to make things neat and tidy, but to disrupt injustice, to end idolatry, and religious bigotry. Jesus didn't come just to play in hay and receive pretty gifts from wise people and shepherds. Jesus came to change the world and to provide a way of hope; a way of love; a way of peace and a way of joy—all while turning the world upside down. If we follow in the way of Jesus, we too are called to change the world.

One thing is certain this year, our world has been rocked. We know what it feels like to have the world turned upside down. Everything changed in 2020. Everything is different, and we can't go back to how things used to be. Even when we get to 2021 and the pandemic ends, we can't go back to how things were in 2019. COVID-19 turned our world upside down. Black Lives Matter turned our world upside down by spotlighting white supremacy, racial hatred, and systemic racism in law enforcement and in other industries.

As followers of the way of Jesus we ought not be surprised when our world is turned upside down. Those in the kin-dom of heaven are expected to make a difference and turn the world upside down over and over again, or in some cases right side up.

In this season of peace and good tidings, our mandate is to continue to turn the world upside down. Mary didn't understand all that was being asked of her. But she knew that if God was leading her, she had to follow. We must have the same willingness to serve God, with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength.

We have a tendency to minimize the gifts given to us to change the world. It is scary to claim our power and speak truth to power. It is easier to minimize our stations in life, our privilege, and deny our culpability in injustice. But we must face our fear and keep moving forward. The angels said, do not be afraid. We are not alone. God is with us and we are surrounded by a cloud of witnesses, cheering for our success in turning the world upside down.

One of my favorite Christmas carols is in the Mid Bleak Winter. I love the last verse that asks,
What can I give Him,
Poor as I am?
If I were a shepherd
I would bring a lamb,
If I were a wise man
I would do my part,
Yet what I can I give Him,
Give my heart.

What are we bringing to the kin-dom table this Christmas that will help change the world? In years past when we came to the table at Christmas, we thought about what we could eat, consume, or take away for our personal satisfaction. Christmas of 2020 has to be different. What gifts are you bringing to the kin-dom table to change the world? What gifts are we bringing to the kin-dom so the lives of others can be uplifted. The world needs what you have to give so those who are sick can find healing, those who are hopeless find meaning, and those who mourn can be comforted. Without you bringing your gifts to the kin-dom table, the real work of Christmas won't get done.

Mystic theologian, Dr. Howard Thurman was clear on the meaning and purpose of Christmas. In his poem, *The Work of Christmas*, Thurman wrote:

The Work of Christmas- Dr. Howard Thurman

When the song of the angels is stilled,
When the star in the sky is gone,
When the kings and princes are home,
When the shepherds are back with their flock,
The work of Christmas begins:

- To find the lost,
- To heal the broken,
- To feed the hungry,
- To release the prisoner,
- To rebuild the nations,
- To bring peace among brothers (siblings)
- To make music in the heart

So, my friends, after we have opened gifts, eaten a healthy meal, taken a nap, talked with our family and loved ones, and watched a Christmas movie, it is time to do the real work of Christmas. It is time to do the work of transformation and changing the world. It is time to use our talents, gifts, money, energy, passion, ingenuity, and influence to make a difference. Our call this Christmas is to use what we have to make things right. Not go back to how things were, but to make things right for the least of these our sisters, our brothers, our siblings, our planet. We can do this. For I believe with Mary, that nothing is impossible with God. Amen!