

Advent 4
St. Paul's/Resurrección, Mount Vernon, WA

December 22, 2020
Rev. Paul Moore

Virgin Birth

In preface to this sermon, we acknowledge once again that we gather on the historic and unceded territory of the Upper Skagit people. Perhaps the time will come when we might establish a relationship with them, to share life and story. They might have some mind-bending messages for us.

Have you ever received one of those mind-bending messages? I did 30-some years ago. Karisse and the boys and I were suffering from stomach issues, all of us together. Life in Ecuador at the time carried with it the constant possibility of contracting one of several intestinal parasites that caused our symptoms. We went to see the doctor. The doctor prescribed the usual remedy, but then he cautioned that pregnant women should not take it, and so it would be prudent to do a pregnancy test before proceeding. The results announced the birth of the one known to you today as Landon. It knocked me off top dead center; no that I minded having a child, I had two already and they were a delight. I just wasn't really counting on a third. I spent a day in the mountains with a good friend, just getting adjusted to the news. Now I wouldn't have it any other way, of course! You all know Landon. Of my three boys, he and I share more interests than the others.

I'm sure, you, too, have received mind-bending messages. Some of them have had happy outcomes, like mine; others have announced tragedy and trials. Nonetheless, we all have had them. In Luke's stories around the birth of Jesus Gabriel delivers two such messages. He first appears to Zechariah, a priest. He and his wife have no children, and they are both up in years. Gabriel appears to him in the Sanctuary of the temple to tell him that they will be the parents of John the Baptist. Zechariah responds, "How will I know that this is so? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years." *How can I know...what do you offer to reassure me? I am the questioner, you are the messenger.* This is a disbelieving challenge, couched as an innocent question. Gabriel is not fooled. The text in Luke 1 reads, "And now because you did not believe..." He is struck dumb until the baby is born!

Six months later Gabriel appears to Mary, as recorded in today's Gospel lesson. "How can this be, since I am a virgin," says the girl. All that Mary's mother had told her about what where babies come from seemed to head in other directions. It's a legitimate question, really. *How can this be? The circumstances don't seem to lead there.* But Mary's response is not a challenge to the message per se, but herself. There is a sense of wonder about it. How can this be? In a sense, she is virgin in her knowledge of what God can do. The Angel hints at that at the end of God's message to her. The potentiality, symbolized in the coming pregnancy, is an open door through which she has yet to walk. She is open to the possibility, even though it lies beyond the scope of her knowledge. What awaits here there? Divine community in a way she did not know possible before. She would become what the Church affirmed officially in the 2nd century—the Mother of God. Her place in the Communion of Saints is not only secure, but visibly so

throughout the centuries. Because of this story and its outcome, she becomes a symbol of the very church itself, the community of those whose response to God follows her lead. The cosmos has shifted, and she has shifted with it.

When we receive mind-bending messages, our cosmos shifts, and we must shift in response. Priorities change, plans are adjusted, and sometimes we need to take a "day in the mountains" to adjust to the news. The annunciation of the coming of Christmas is the first mind-bending message in the Christian tradition. How will we shift to meet it? We are in Mary's place. Gabriel is telling us that God is coming, and that we have an essential role in that process. What does that entail?

In a recent meditation by Richard Rohr his contributor talks about the concept of virginity. He notes that as Thomas Merton wrote, there is a place in the center of our being that is owned only by God. A couple of weeks ago I was in the woods with my friend, Laurie, that most of you know. We were hunting deer, and the deer were not being very huntable. I was sitting, waiting and watching, when all of a sudden that thing happens that happens to me now and again. Suddenly the world opened up and it was all just so incredibly beautiful. I began to smile, and smile and smile, for a deep, happy joy began to bubble up from within. All of a sudden, I wasn't really cold anymore. I was at peace.

Deep within our heart of hearts there is a place that is quiet. It is a place where the ego attends to one's own needs without standing in the way of those of others. It is a place of prayer. It is hard to get to, for our egos demand control, our desires and pains clammer for attention. And our plans make us busy and occupied. As Advent moves toward Nativity, now is the time to be quiet. Go inward to that place of purity, where God alone meets with you. Then turn and look out at your world from that place and see how it is changed.

Last night Karisse and I spent the night at Bethlehem Lutheran Church in Sedro Woolley. We were there as overnight chaperones with Family Promise, a program that many of you know well. People suffering from homelessness are taken in, given a place to eat, sleep, shower and do laundry. They are mentored in life management, and when they graduate from the program they are equipped to get back into a home of their own. It's not perfect, but the ideal that we should care for the least of Jesus' siblings is the shining ideal that inspires the program.

There is the potential in our society for a holy and sacred center, a shining ideal. It is a place where our full humanity has space to thrive in relationship with all of those around us, even and possibly especially the ones that are normally invisible. A place where power is used to serve the powerless, and resources are used to meet the needs of all. This shining city on a hill may not be fully achieved this side of the final resolution of all things, but it is not merely a pipe dream. It is the beacon light that shines on the best of who we are together. As Advent draws toward its conclusion with the Birth of God among us, for love of those lost in the fray we engage, challenging power and resources to live up to their full potential, and giving birth to justice and peace.

If there is a vision of sacred society, there is a vision of a sacramental earth. The other day I read an article that Deacon Dennis gave me about the Nez Pierce's legal case against the state, seeking the destruction of four dams along the lower Snake river. There was a time when the salmon run up the Snake was one of their primary sources of protein. When the salmon did not run, they hunted and fished for other fish. At the right times they gathered wild edibles. In treaties they poorly understood, they signed away rights to the land, but not the rights to hunt, fish and gather. In terms of their life experience, those treaties were violated in the creation of these four dams. What they really want down deep inside is the freedom to reestablish a relationship with the earth that was flooded and blocked by the building of the dams, to reestablish the harmony of the water and land. Their ideal is a creation that is sacred, bearer of God, like Mary.

When creation is understood as God's presence made manifest, in other words, sacramental, economy serves harmony, not the other way around. When creation is sacramental, we hold back, we reduce, reuse and recycle. When creation is sacramental, we honor those who have called this place home in the past. As Advent rolls into Incarnation, we are called to a place of virginal purity with the earth. We reduce our carbon footprint. We seek to honor those traditions that have maintained this view of the earth and can inform us now. We look for the Creator made creation to be given birth again.