

"Compassion is knowing that my future is tied to yours."

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St. Thomas Lutheran Church, Bloomington, Indiana

Make Room

Luke 1:26-38, NRSV, emended

In the sixth month (of Elizabeth's pregnancy) the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, and to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. Gabriel 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.

In the beginning, before the beginning, there was God. That's it. God. When God began to create, well, we're not sure what happened, really. In her book *God, Creation and All That Jazz*, Dr. Ann Pederson suggests that God had to make room for creation. Before creating, all that was, was God and so, God was everything. So, when God wanted to create, God had to create space in God's self to create. I love this image, the idea of God curling around a space where once was God, then nothing, and then creation. I'm not sure this is a factual story - how could we know? - but the piece of it that feels true to me is how God makes room. This is the season of celebration, sure, but the practice of this season is one of making room for Christ, however he comes to us.

Mary, of course, would soon find out what it means to make room, as everything inside her got shoved aside to make space for a growing baby. She knew what it meant to make room, as there was no longer any room for her to take a full breath. But Mary also made room in other ways. While the answer to the question, "Mary did you know?" is yes, she

knew because Gabriel told her, the truth is that Mary had no certainty about her immediate future when she said yes to Gabriel's message. There was no guarantee that Joseph would stick around. No guarantee that he would agree to the kind of marriage plans that would keep Mary and their future family from being shamed. And, of course, Gabriel's words manage to leave out what Simeon will later tell her in the Temple, that a sword will one day pierce her own heart, too. To agree to take on this kind of uncertainty is to move aside and let the elephant into the room. And yet, in Mary we have this example. This season is about making room for Christ.

Madeline L'Engle wrote about this moment in her poem *After Annunciation*:

This is the irrational season
when love blooms bright and wild.
Had Mary been filled with reason
there'd have been no room for the child.

Dorothy Day, the great champion of the poor, wrote about making room for Christ in a December 1945 issue of *Catholic Worker*. She said,

It is no use saying that we are born two thousand years too late to give room to Christ. Christ is always with us, always asking for room in our hearts. But now it is with the voice of our contemporaries that he speaks, with the eyes of store clerks, factory workers, and children that he gazes; with the hand of office workers, slum dwellers, and suburban housewives that he gives. It is with the feet of soldiers and tramps that he walks, and with the heart of anyone in need that he longs for shelter.

When we say it this way it sounds so easy, but it isn't. Day continues,

It would be foolish to pretend that it is easy always to remember this. If everyone were holy and handsome, with "alter Christus" shining in neon lighting from them, it would be easy to see Christ in everyone. If Mary had appeared in Bethlehem clothed, as St. John says, with the sun, a crown of twelve stars on her head and the moon under her feet, then people would have fought to make room for her. But that was not God's way for her nor is it Christ's way for Himself now when He is disguised under every type of humanity that treads the earth.

Day's answer to this difficulty is to see everyone, without exception as Christ. She concludes, we do this "not because these people remind us of Christ...but because they are Christ, asking us to find room for Him exactly as He did at the first Christmas."

And that leads us to this week. Wednesday night in our own town. A complicated and complex situation. With a little under an hour's notice, the City of Bloomington evicted people experiencing homelessness and living in tents from Seminary Park. A complicated

and complex situation. But because of the season, and because I am a Christian, I am compelled to ask, "How can we make room for people experiencing homeless in our community?" Determining right or wrong in this situation is, quite frankly, insufficient. The question really isn't, should people be permitted to erect tents in a park and sleep there? The question is, how will we make room for Christ when Christ is a homeless person in *our* city?

As people who follow Christ, the first step of making room is to throw out simple answers. The simple answer for Mary was no. No version of her yes was uncomplicated. If we are to keep the practice of this season, we must embrace complexity.

The second step is curiosity. Let us remember for a moment who Mary really was: she was a woman about to be wed in a society where that was her greatest value; she was a member of an oppressed and occupied race; she lived in tumultuous times. Surely her yes was at least part curiosity about what God might be up to. And, as a young mother, she was about to be nothing but curious - what does that feeling mean? what does that cry mean? what does this diaper mean? Not to be trivial about it, because being curious about other people - not to be like Gladys Kravitz on *Bewitched* - there is a difference between curious and nosy. Being curious means assuming you don't know everything there is to know about a person or a situation. Bring your sense of wonder. Ask questions.

And the third step for making room for Christ is compassion. Compassion is Mary knowing what Jesus could mean for her people, even if it might break her own heart. Frederick Buechner says it so perfectly, "Compassion is the sometimes fatal capacity for feeling what it is like to live inside somebody else's skin. It's the knowledge that there can never really be any peace and joy for me until there is peace and joy finally for you too." Compassion is knowing that my future is tied to yours.

Beloved, we pray for this every year. You know, when we sing the carol "Joy to the world ... let ev'ry heart prepare him room." This is the practice of the season. Making room for Christ.
Amen.