

“A Perplexing Faith”
Luke 1: 26-38

Rev. Liz Miller
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Christmas is a season that has a lot of catch phrases. We see Santa and we think “ho ho ho!” “Merry Christmas” is so stuck together that we don't imagine saying Happy Christmas! Or Hurray Christmas! It has to be Merry Christmas and Happy New Year!

Our Christmas carols are so common place that they have become their own catch phrases. For example, if I say “Deck the halls with boughs of holly,” you would say “Fa la la la la la la” If I say, “Silent Night” You would say, “Holy Night!” If I say, “Here Comes Santa Claus, Here comes Santa Claus,” you would say, “Right down Santa Claus Lane!”

One of my personal favorite holiday phrases doesn't come from a song, but it should still be familiar to you. My favorite is “It's a Christmas Miracle!” You have to say it with total excitement. I look for any excuse to exclaim “It's a Christmas Miracle” from finding a bonus roll of scotch tape when I'm wrapping presents to making it to the post office early enough that I don't have to pay for priority shipping to my California family.

“It's a Christmas Miracle!” transports me to my favorite Christmas stories like when Scrooge changes his scrooge-y ways and sends the prize turkey to the Cratchit home; when Bing Crosby and Danny Kaye sing and dance their way to saving General Waverly's Vermont Inn. It reminds me of when little Ralphie gets his much wished for Red Ryder Carbine Action 200-shot Range Model Air Rifle and when the Grinch's small heart grew three sizes in a day.

“It's a Christmas Miracle!” can be applied to just about any Christmas story, and that of course, is true for The Christmas Story, the one that started them all, the reason for the choirs anthems, all of our joyful prayers, and the reason we are here today. The birth of Jesus was certainly a story of miraculous proportions. One of the things that makes it so miraculous, and sets it apart from all the

other stories we tell this time of year is that it was so unexpected. No one—not Mary, not Joseph, not the shepherds or the wise men—expected Jesus to be born, let alone for this tiny baby to be the life-saving, world-changing, history-making Messiah. The real miracle of Christmas is that no one expected it, not even Jesus' own parents.

All of the other Christmas stories we tell of Scrooge's and Grinch's, they are their own kinds of Christmas miracles, but they are different. We watch them hoping for a miracle of transformation and love. We watch them and we know what is coming, even if the details elude us, but on that very first Christmas, no one expected it. No one saw it coming. No one even knew there was something to hope for, something better yet to come. It was a complete surprise.

The surprise, the miracle, of Christmas begins from the first moment that Mary finds out she is pregnant. When the angel Gabriel comes before Mary and tells her that God is with her, the scriptures tell us “she was much perplexed by his words.” I imagine she was thinking, “Why is God with me? There is nothing I have been desiring, no big thing I have been anticipating, and nothing that sets me apart from any other ordinary person.” There was no reason that God should have chosen her. No reason that she should have expected to be greeted by an angel. No reason that she should be singled out. It was completely unexpected news followed by a completely unexpected, wholly miraculous, pregnancy.

Unexpected pregnancies are not entirely uncommon in the Bible. There are at least four that we are familiar with: Sarah who in her old age unexpectedly gave birth to Isaac, Hannah who prayed for years and years before she gave birth to her son Samuel, and Elizabeth, Mary's own cousin, who long past her child-bearing years gave birth to John the Baptist. All of the pregnancies are unexpected in one way or another and all are announced beforehand by God or God's angels, but there is a big difference that sets apart Mary's miracle from those of Sarah, Hannah, and Elizabeth.

The first three all experienced barrenness for many years in their marriages. All of them prayed

for the birth of a child, and all of their prayers were answered. The births of their children were miracles but as far as miracles go, it's not so far fetched. When we listen to their stories, we are rooting for them. We are praying with them. Many of us can relate to the desire to have our own children and the struggles and pain that are too often a part of that process. We root for the first three women with unexpected pregnancies because they are our sisters, our wives, our friends, and ourselves.

But, Mary is different. Mary was not praying for this. There was no expectation or anticipation or dream of a hoped for child. I have to believe that carrying any child, much less the son of God, was far from Mary's mind or what she believed to be a conceivable reality at that point in her young life. There was no reason. There was no precedence. There was no prayer. There was only surprise. There was only the miracle of the unexpected.

My favorite part about Mary's story and her struggle to understand why she was chosen is that there was nothing extraordinary about her life. Until the moment we meet her, there is nothing that sets her apart. The miracle of Christmas is that an angel appeared to someone as boring as you and me. Her life and her experience did not set her up for expecting greatness, but still greatness came. Still, God was with her. It was a miracle of an unexpected presence, and an unexpected choice.

Mary is my reminder that God does not only choose extraordinary people to do extraordinary things. God is with people who least expect it, who have been groomed for an average life, who hope to do some good but don't expect to do anything too great. God is with people who are just getting by the best they can. God was with Mary, showing the whole world that there is no one too small or too ordinary or too quiet to be reached by God. God will work miracles in any place God chooses—and that could mean you or your spouse, that could mean your children, even the troublemaker middle child. That could mean your recluse neighbor or your crazy uncle or the person you passed by in the grocery store aisle, bumping carts, but not even noticing what they look like. God can be at work in them. God can be working miracles in their life. God can be with each one of us, no matter how

insignificant we might feel. It happened to Mary, and it can happen to you.

The world is full of Christmas miracles like Mary's, of people who through no expectation of their own end up making a big impact on the world, end up serving God in huge ways, and are examples of miraculous ministries happening in ordinary places. One of my favorite examples of this is Florence Reed. In the early nineties Florence Reed signed up for a two year stint in the Peace Corps in Panama. When she made that two year commitment she had no idea that twenty years later she would still be there, as the founder and director of a nonprofit Sustainable Harvest International, working with hundreds of families and dozens of communities throughout Central America to develop sustainable agricultural practices and reforestation practices. Florence Reed has changed the lives of countless people, something she didn't even dream as being possible when she first tentatively moved to Panama, uncertain of what was in the future and hoping to just finish out her two years successfully.

All around us God is moving through people and choosing people to do wonderful things that if left on our own, or left to our own imagination, might never happen. I love the miracles of transformation and prayers being answered, but it is the unexpected miracles that I love most of all. I never tire of being reminded that God can put any one of us to task, at any moment, no matter how unexpected it might be for us. It keeps us on our toes. It keeps us alert. It keeps us looking out for the ways in which God might already be working in our lives.

I have heard people say that when Mary is perplexed and questions the angel's appearance that she doubts God, doubting that God was capable of performing a miracle through her. I don't think that is what she was questioning. I think she was questioning her own worth and worthiness to play such an important role in God's creation and in the future of the world. I think she saw herself as so ordinary and so unassuming that she didn't understand why God would choose her.

This Christmas, I was you to remember the miracle of our God is that, just as Mary learned, there is no such thing as ordinary or undeserving. Our God is a God that transforms us from

unexceptional to magnificent when we least expect it. Our God is one that go into places where you would least expect a God to be and makes miracles happen. Our God is one that brings hope to the hopeless and joy even when we don't believe we deserve it. Our God is a God that appeared to Mary, whom none of us should know, and known of us should remember, but instead, because of God, we know her, and we love her, and we see in her the miracle of Christmas. Amen.