

Implausible

Luke 1:26-38 4th Sunday in Advent LOVE
Shannon

Rev Jean

"Faith may be defined briefly as an illogical belief in the occurrence of the improbable."¹

And yet, John the Baptist ranged across the countryside, smelling of camel and proclaiming the coming of the Lord. People believed him. People sought his baptisms and his counsel. Even Herod sought his advice and trusted him and was greatly distressed to have ordered his murder. So much so, that when he heard about Jesus he assumed it was John the Baptist risen from the dead.

And today, we have Mary's story. What was it about Mary that made her appropriate as an object of God's grace? What was so amazingly special? There's no backstory – nothing. Why? It is because the writers believed there was nothing to tell. She was ordinary – a young woman engaged to be married to a man of good lineage.

Sad news came to me this week. My good friend Rev Richard Pedersen passed away in his sleep in Scotland. Richard was the minister in Cooma before David and more importantly, he was the Chaplain before me in the Canberra hospitals. Richard is one of the people largely responsible for me standing here today.

I attended a theological conference in Sydney where I heard some amazing speakers like the Rev Dr Val Webb. There were a dozen people I had never heard before, across a number of denominations and faiths, who were talking of faith as a journey with questions and joy - something completely unlike my experience of church. The audience were enraptured and many of them were clergy. But not clergy as I had known. These people could laugh and confess brokenness and doubts. They were honest and joyful and companionable. They treated me like I was a person of equal value – not like some sinner dragged in off the street.

I came away from the conference promising myself 2 things. One – I needed to do some theological and Bible studies to see where these people were coming from. I understood only about ½ of what they said. And two – I needed to get back to who I thought I was. I needed to volunteer for something, anything. I remembered the person I used to be. A person who thought our job was to work towards making a better world. To be honest, I had been through a time where I felt estranged from humanity.

The first person I met after the conference was Richard. He was kind of church-shopping. He needed a place where he might worship on his weekends off. Over morning tea, I did the churchy-hospitality thing and made sure he had someone to talk to. I asked him what he did and he told me he was a minister ½ time in Cooma and ½ as the Chaplain for 5 hospitals.

¹ H L Mencken (1880-1956) American journalist

“OH, wow!” I said, “you must have a lot of volunteers.” No, he said, only one ... and she is my wife. Then I said something like, ‘that’s terrible,’ and realised what I had just walked into.

There are some people that, in a Jesus-like fashion, can look **into** you and see something you cannot. They see a spark, a tiny flame – and they gently feed it.

I volunteered for Richard for a few years, studied clinical pastoral education, completed my theological degree and began my period of Discernment. Richard thought I was definitely the one who should replace him but it took over a year for me to even imagine it. When he retired, I was commissioned as a Pastor, gave up my professional career and began my candidacy. A most unlikely vessel.

When I got to the seminary, I met a lot of very confident people. “Oh yes! Jesus has called ME!” people. And you know what? I was never very comfortable with their confidence. I don’t feel special or anointed as such. I don’t hear God screaming at me. What I hear are the whispers around the fireside of my soul. The gentle voice that comes, like to Mary, almost in the night. “Do not be afraid”.

And that brings me to another point in Mary’s conversation. Gabriel greets Mary with the words, “Greetings favoured one. The Lord be with you” and assures her she has found favour with the Lord. I am no Greek scholar, but I have been told that the word that has been translated from Greek as “favour” can also mean “grace”.

To me, this is important. Just as our faith calls on us to accept an apology WITH grace and in fact, offer grace to those who have wronged us (...and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive others)... We are called to accept grace not as a favour but as love. If we believe that God loves us – it is arrogant and bloody-minded not to accept it... and yet, we struggle.

We look around the room and say, “God loves you... and you...and you!” – but struggle to love ourselves. We need to work on the good grace to live with that. And that takes courage too. What did Mary do? She asked a few questions (perhaps the shortest period of discernment ever!), and then said, “here am I, the servant of the Lord...let it be.”

And what was it about Mary that made her the perfect choice? There is nothing in the text that gives us an answer to that question. We hear a whole lot about Joseph, Zachariah and Elizabeth but nothing about Mary’s virtues or vices or why she was chosen.

“That is precisely the point. God chooses because God chooses. Mary does not earn or deserve the honour of becoming the mother of Jesus anymore than would any other woman.”²

And neither do you. Love is free. It is freely given, sometimes it takes courage and is not always easy to receive. Sometimes, we even struggle to look each other in the eye.

² Brueggemann, Cousar et al, *Texts for Preaching Year B*, p.40

God is love. It is like air, around us and in us and rained upon us.

And now just one more lesson in linguistics. The word 'plausible' comes from the Latin root word that means "applause". Implausible, therefore means, 'not worthy of applause'.

When you consider the generosity of God's grace and love;
the divine's gift to the world;
Mary's role in making it happen;
Joseph's faith-filled acceptance;
And the grace laid upon you...
– is it plausible or implausible? Your choice.

Holy spirit, as we leave this last Sunday before Christmas, let me go from this church with the taste of love in my mouth. Amen.

Poem from Max Lucado

CHRISTMAS

Jesus humbled himself.
He went from commanding angels
to sleeping in the straw
from holding stars
to clutching Mary's finger.

The palm that held the Universe
took the nail of a soldier.

Why?

Because that's what love does.