

**Rideau Park United Church, Ottawa**  
**Sunday, December 20, 2020 – Elizabeth Bryce**

**Readings: Psalm 132**  
**Luke 1:26-39**

**Sermon: The Lord Is With You (Advent 4)**

In September and October this year, I spent a lot of time waiting in line at the hospital. Waiting with a number of other patients, answering the screening questions, making sure we had specific appointments, seeing that we were masked and sanitizing our hands. When we entered the hospital, we were always alone. If you didn't need a translator or a registered caregiver, family members or friends were not allowed to accompany you – whether you were having a test, a consultation or actual surgery, your loved ones had to drop you at the door and leave, hoping for the best.

One day I was standing in line at the main entrance, and a few spots ahead of me, there was a young couple. She was very pregnant, and showing every sign of being in labour. Her partner managed to snag a wheel chair, which she sat in for about two minutes, before deciding she was better on her feet and walking a few steps forward, a few steps back.

Finally someone came from the maternity ward, to take her up to labour and delivery. But her partner was not allowed to go with her. He was told, as compassionately as possible, that he would have to leave the building, and wait until they checked her. Then if she was truly in labour, they would call his cell phone to tell him to come up. We all witnessed the shock, anger, tears that this news created. By the time the nurse wheeled the soon to be mum away, both of them were crying, and a few of us in line wiped a tear or two, as her partner just stood there waiting and watching until they turned the corner out of sight.

“The Lord is with you,” the angel said. “Do not be afraid.”

Those were the words that came to me, as I thought of all the mothers delivering babies, of all the patients being dropped off at the door for surgery, of all the people meeting with oncologists and surgeons, with therapists and radiologists. People coming to the hospital for difficult procedures and even harder conversations, all of them without the presence of the people they usually turn to for support.

The couple in the line-up never expected they would be separated at that critical moment in their journey to parenthood. They probably knew there would be no visitors, that the new grandparents would not be allowed to pop by to meet the newest member of the family. But it was pretty clear they did not anticipate the mother heading off to labour and delivery by her lonesome while the father waited anxiously outside.

I don't know how it all worked out. Whether it was only minutes or hours before the two parents were reunited, but I know, for them, it probably felt like forever. Once baby is born, and safely home, it will just become part of the peculiar legend of that child's arrival, like my friends whose children were born in the blackout of 2003, or the big snowstorm of 1999.

"The Lord is with you," the angel said. "Do not be afraid."

More than two thousand years ago, the gospel of Luke tells us that another young mother and another young father, were shocked by the strange turn of their unfolding birth story. Today's gospel reading focusses on the story of Mary, a young girl in Nazareth, who encountered an angel one day, this angel a messenger from God, a messenger who had an incredible tale to tell her. "Greetings favoured one!" the angel began "The Lord is with you,"

The gospel tells us that Mary was greatly perplexed by the angel's greeting. Because what exactly does God's favour mean? Maybe she would be happier if God just moved on to someone else, with all these angels and favours and what not. She could just keep travelling the ordinary predictable path that she and Joseph always planned to follow...

But Mary was about to find out what it meant to be uniquely favoured, favoured with a blessing that would be both gift and challenge.

"The Lord is with you," the angel said. "Do not be afraid."

Mary must have felt terribly alone. Who did she break the news to first? Her parents, or Joseph? A sister or best friend? The news was so shocking, so unbelievable, that I am sure whoever she did tell must have taken a step back, maybe even walked away for a moment to wrap their head around this astonishing scandal. And in that moment, didn't Mary feel terribly alone? Abandoned? Afraid? Did the knowledge that "God was with her" make any difference when she was facing shame, misunderstanding, social rejection, maybe even execution?

And yet the words of the angel are full of power, and meaning, and assurance, when our all our careful planning is being overturned. For Mary that began when she heard "The Lord is with you."

There are lots of theories and speculation about these stories of Jesus' conception found in the gospels of Matthew and Luke. The scholarship studying the beginning of God's incarnation in Jesus is diverse and deep and fascinating, but that is not what I intend to talk about today.

Instead I want to immerse our hearts and minds in something which is even more deep and mysterious. For some people, it is even harder to accept as truth than immaculate conception.

This mystery is our belief that **the Lord IS with YOU** – just as the Lord was with Mary, just as the Lord was with Joseph, just as the Lord was with the angels and the shepherds and all the characters in the Christmas pageant.

Two thousand years later, we are still recipients of the affirmation that Mary heard: the Lord is with you.

It is true, her experience, and the unfolding of that news into real life, was utterly unique. Every birth is not the birth of a Messiah or a Saviour, or a Christ. But in every new life, in every birth, we believe: “the Lord is with you.”

Imagine if that was the message we all heard as we approach the celebration of Christmas. Especially this year, when the core of Christmas must cease to be social gatherings, and gift exchanges, live concerts and Santa Claus parades. Imagine if we were to fill all those missing gaps with our faith that “The Lord is with you, favoured one.”

God’s interpretation of “favoured” is not measured in the signs of success that we are used to, or even what was important in Mary’s place and time.. We might think that God’s favour is something we have to earn, by being especially good or pure or faithful or obedient. That is the way we usually depict Mary, as obedient, pure, passive – certainly not the kind of rebel who sings songs about overturning the world’s powers, so that the poor and hungry can be filled with good things. .

Mary herself was a surprising choice – a young, peasant woman, from Nazareth – a village that was at the end of the world to most Judeans. Yet maybe it was **because** Mary was humble, flawed, and utterly reliant on the compassion of others, that she was open to God’s invitation to partnership in this birthing of hope and love. She heard the words: “The Lord is with you, favoured one” and she felt powerful. Mary believed that, when God was with her, all things were possible.

“The Lord is with you, favoured one.”

Do you believe it? Deep down inside many of us there is an embedded fear that we are not good enough to be favoured by God. Not good enough, not strong enough, not beautiful enough, or smart enough – it is not fitting for us for the Lord to accompany us. We might say the words “we are not alone” in our creed. We might accept the words intellectually, or believe them theoretically. But do we really believe that God is with us, when we are alone or afraid, when we have been challenged to do something improbable or generous or revolutionary? Do we really allow the angels’ words to enter into our hearts and to heal whatever is broken, or defensive in us, whatever is wounded or resistant?

Throughout the Advent stories, both the prophecies of the ancients, and the birth narratives, we are told again and again that God embraces us with grace no matter who

we are, no matter our mistakes or flaws. God knows our past, and our hopes for the future, our strength and our weaknesses.

Just look at Joseph, whose first inclination when he heard Mary's news was to get as far away from Mary as possible. Another angel intrusion broke through his fear, giving him courage and hope. He came to believe that God was with Mary, that God was with the unborn child, that God was even with him, Joseph, as fearful as he was.

"The Lord is with you," the angel said. "Do not be afraid."

2020 is going to find a lot of people alone for the holidays –all we want is to do something, anything to break through the terrible isolation of the pandemic, as if being alone on December 25 is the worst fate we can imagine. Yet many people already spend the day alone every year, sometimes because they are far away from family, sometimes they are distanced by conflict, sometimes they have no social support or because of addiction or abuse.

Care packages on the doorstep are a great option, as is a visit from a balcony or through a window or on the phone. But what must be most significant for us, as followers of Mary's holy child, is our own belief, our own acceptance, that we are ALL children of God. Then, if we truly believe it for ourselves, we will practice it in our response and our care for others.

Last week my daughter Rebekah, as part of the YAYA network associated with the Region and Camp Awesome, organized a Zoom Christmas party. In the preparations for the party, she and two others took "care packages" to the young people who had indicated they would like to attend. One teenager had just found out that her whole family tested positive for COVID, everyone but her, and so she was quarantined with them, not able to go to school, even afraid to walk around the block. The Camp Awesome crew still took her the care package, they left it outside, and texted her, so she could come out and wave to them, socially distanced, at the edge of her street.

No hugs, no exchange by hand, but still a clear safely-distanced sign to her and her family that their community of faith has not abandoned her, or rejected her because of the illness. Then they were able to check in with her at the party, with technology to make it possible to widen the circle and to extend God's love through the airwaves, so that there was no difference between those who were touched or untouched by the reality of the pandemic.

"The Lord is with you," the angel said. "Do not be afraid."

Wherever we are, whatever circumstance has caused us to feel alone, or unworthy, God is with us. Thanks be to God.