

PONDERING IN OUR HEARTS

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Readings

Luke 1:26-38

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

Incarnation by Lynn Ungar

The trees have finally
shaken off their cloak
of leaves, redrawn
themselves more sternly
against the sky. I confess
I have coveted this
casting off of flesh,
have wished myself
all line and form, all God.

I confess that I am caught
by the story of Christmas,
by the pronouncement of the Spirit
upon Mary's plain flesh.
What right did the angel
have to come to her
with the news of that
unprovided, unimaginable
birth? What right
had God to take on flesh
so out of season?

When Mary lay gasping
in water and blood
that was of her own body
but not her own
did she choose one gleaming,
antiseptic star to carry
her through the night?

The flesh has so few choices,
the angels, perhaps, none.
The trees will shake themselves

and wait for spring.
The angels, unbodied, will clutch
the night with their singing.
And Mary, like so many,
troubled and available,
will hear the word:

*The power of the Most High
will overshadow you*

And in her flesh, respond.

Sermon

Mary would have been a teen-ager, likely far closer to 13 than 18, pregnant with her first child under mystifying and shameful circumstances. Her name would have been Maryam, a derivative of Miriam, sister of Moses. Later she would become Maria and Mary as her legend traveled. Yet now, imagine a young woman with olive skin, her hair perhaps in a long dark braid down her back. Dependent for her honor on a man more mystified than she, her betrothed, not the father of the child she carries so heavily.

The Bible actually tells us very little about her. She is mentioned far more prominently in the Qur'an where an entire chapter, the 19th, is named for her. In Christian scripture, she is present for Jesus conception, birth and childhood. She shows up again with Jesus' brothers during his ministry (and is spurned). Only the Gospel of John has her present at her son's crucifixion. That her story and place of honor grew throughout Christendom and beyond is a testament to the power of the Divine Feminine to manifest herself even in the rockiest soil.

The story of Mary in the Bible picks up with the Annunciation when the Angel Gabriel arrives to tell Mary that she will bear a child though she is yet a virgin. The Qur'an begins the story with Mary's birth. While it may seem odd that the mother of Jesus plays such a large role in the Holy Book of Islam, it is evidence of the deep currents these two religions share.

In chapter 3 of the Qur'an, Mary's mother, finding herself with child declares: "O my Lord! I do dedicate unto Thee what is in my womb for Thy special service: So accept this of me: For Thou hearest and knowest all things." Mary's mother is a bit surprised when the child she has so dedicated is born a girl. She had pictured raising a fine son to be a scholar or priest. Nevertheless, she dedicates the child to Allah and names her Maryam, which means maidservant of God. Allah accepts Mary, and has her raised in the house of the priest Zachariah – a rare honor for a woman. Mary grows in beauty and purity. In Islam, Mary is held to be the best woman ever born on earth.

Chapter 19, the Book of Mary, presents a story of the Annunciation very close to that in the Gospel of Luke. When [Mary] withdrew from her family to a place in the East. She placed a veil (to screen herself) from them; then We sent her Our angel, and he appeared before her as a man in all respects." After seeing the angel, she said: "I seek refuge from thee to Allah Most Gracious: come not near if thou dost fear Allah." The angel Gabriel responded: "Nay, I am only a messenger from thy Lord, to announce to thee the gift of a pure son." [And Mary asked] "How shall I have a son, seeing that no man has touched me, and I am not unchaste?" The Angel Gabriel said: "So it will be: thy Lord says, 'That is easy for Me: and We wish to appoint [your son] as a Sign unto men and a Mercy from Us.' It is a matter so decreed." (Qur'an 19:16-21).

In both the Bible and Qur'an, a virgin conceiving a child is proof that with God, all things are possible, yet the Qur'an is adamant this is not evidence that Jesus is the son of God. Islam is radically monotheistic, indeed radically unitarian; utterly rejecting the concept of the trinity, for only Allah is God. There can be no other. The Qur'an's Annunciation story is evidence of the great favor Allah bestows on both Mary and Jesus. Jesus is one of the greatest prophets in Islam, but he is most certainly the Son of Mary, not of God.

The birth of Jesus is very different in the Qur'an than the traditional Christian stories. Mary bears Jesus alone under a palm

tree. No Joseph, no manger, no shepherds. Allah alone provides for her. Making dates fall from the tree to feed her and a stream of water to flow by her. Later the infant Jesus speaks and defends his mother's chastity.

But this is getting ahead of the story.

It's not Christmas yet, indeed this is but the first Sunday of Advent in the Christian Calendar – just the beginning of the four weeks of waiting and anticipation for the birth and rebirth of the Holy. God incarnated, living, breathing, suffering, laughing, human, flesh and bone. Emmanuel, God with us.

The world is yet pregnant with possibility.

In this time of Advent, let us consider the young pregnant Mary.

Let us consider what is waiting to be born in each of us.

Mary allowed the Holy Spirit to enter her. She had no choice but to let it gestate for a good while. There was no way to hurry it along.

The author of the Gospel of Luke tells us that Mary pondered things in her heart. She treasured them. For me this always conjures the image of the Blessed Virgin Mary, the perfectly submissive, beatifically beautiful Mother of God. Patient, long-suffering Mary, impossibly pure – an image I have never much cottoned to, for it doesn't seem to serve the real lives of real women.

Mary pondered and treasured many things in her heart both before and after the birth of this unlikely son. Yet the Greek words that are translated as ponder and treasure – and they are four different words – elicit more of a sensation of agitation and disquiet. Of surprise and confusion. Inner turmoil, fighting to make sense of the unbelievable, the incredible.

This is a Mary confused and troubled by the angel's announcement. A Mary not crazy about being an unwed mother. Although in the end she submits, it is not without real mental effort. And though she "treasures" these things, the words have a sense of preserving and holding on to keep something from perishing or being forgotten. As if, these incredible things will fade away in the dailyness of life. Giving birth and raising a son will fill her days, and the angels visit, the words of the shepherds will fade to a distant memory, almost a dream, unless she remembers them continually, vigilantly.

This is not the placid, accepting Mary we have come to know. She was anxious and perplexed. Like any other mother, anticipating the birth of her child, she is amazed and concerned for the holy thing growing within her.

The month of advent represents the final month of this pregnancy. It is now at its fullest, most awkward, most anxious stage.

There are many definitions for pregnant in the Oxford English Dictionary. Here are some of my favorites:

Big, laden, swelling; of a sail, bellying.

Teeming with ideas, fertile, imaginative, inventive, resourceful, ready.

Apt to receive or be influenced; receptive; disposed, inclined, ready.

Fertile or fruitful in results; big *with* consequences; containing important issues; momentous.

Advent is the season of waiting, waiting in expectation for the birth of something new in the world.

What is waiting to be born in you?

How will you use this time of gestation?

As Unitarian Universalists, we believe that Mary was as fully human any of us. Just as the son she was to bear was fully human. And yet what unrealized promise lay within her big, laden, swelling belly? What unrealized promise lies within you?

For within each of us lies the promise and possibility of new life. Of the Holy manifesting in our lives. We carry this promise within us always. As Mary walks the long dark road to Bethlehem, heavy with child, we walk with her. Our promise teems within us, grows big and momentous.

We await Emmanuel, God With Us. The Holy Movement that will comfort exiles, bring cheer to an aching heart. That will be present with every broken soul and turn our hearts to peace. Yet we do not wait for an external divinity to bring these things to us. Just as Mary was filled with the spirit, just as Jesus was spirit-filled, so, too, are we. We carry, just as Mary did, the hope of the world that we may be delivered from evil, that we may yet bring peace to the earth. That Holy Manifestation that Mary carried came to tell us that we hold the Love, the Truth, the Light and the Hope *within* us.

What is waiting to be born in you?

Advent is a time that we can ponder – even in perplexity and confusion, even as we are lost in the dark – We can ponder what is growing within us. It presents us with the opportunity to reflect in the quiet and dark what is gestating and growing within you. To feel “That the power of the Most High will over-shadow you.” How is the Holy calling to you? What gifts do you offer a weary world?

Mary was young, confused, receptive and ready, perhaps, but uncertain of what lay ahead of her. We are likely in a similar state. Yet what is waiting to be born in each of us, pulls us just surely forward. During Advent, let us ponder, let us sit in the quiet and dark and wonder what we most want to feel born within us. To listen to the voice still and small within us.

It can certainly be a little daunting to consider the power that lies within us. We may yearn to let it out, give it fullest birth into a world that needs a powerful love, compassion, light. That needs our gifts. Yet it can be unnerving, intimidating. Unless we remember the fullest humanity of the examples before us.

Dennis Bratcher writes: “It is truly a humbling experience to read back through the Old Testament and see how frail and imperfect all the ‘heroes’ actually are. Abraham, the coward who cannot believe the promise. Jacob, the cheat who struggles with everybody. Moses, the impatient murderer who cannot wait for God. Samson, the womanizing drunk. David, the power abusing adulterer. And finally, a very young Jewish girl from a small village in a remote corner of a great empire.”

This pondering, this turning inward, this gestating, this imaginative, teeming with ideas, inventive, resourceful, ready, receptive energy is indeed the energy of the Divine Feminine within us. Mary, the Buddhist Kwan Yin, Sophia – the spirit of wisdom, Earth Mother, Santeria’s Yemaya.

This Divine Mother knows what it is to be pregnant, full and waiting. It knows the pain of labor and birth. It knows the confusion and anxiety of such birthing and yet it counsels us gently to have patience. To ponder and to treasure. To wait, even in the darkness, anxiety and confusion.

We are not a people who are very good at waiting. The idea of waiting – in lines, in traffic – in this season, seems to compel us to scurry about even more, hoping to beat the rush. And this only further feeds the frenzy of consumerism that this season brings out despite our best efforts and intentions.

So take your time. Let this time of Advent, of anticipation, carry you into the dark. Let sorrow, confusion, anxiety rest. Use Advent to be subversively counter-cultural. Enter the spirit of the season and let its true Holy Spirit enter you. As Mary let it enter.

The anticipation is a challenge. A challenge not to rush to the presents under the tree. Yeah, yeah, this waiting is great, but when do we get Peace on Earth. The deepest message of this time of year is that the possibility for peace lies within you. You are asked to dwell more in the possibility than the peace itself. For it doesn’t come by our willing it. It comes in the waiting, the gestating. In letting yourself be full and expectant. Don’t anticipate an outcome, you really don’t know what it will

be. When the spirit of wisdom, the great mother Sophia blows across your life it can have unimaginable consequences. The point of this season is the waiting, not any final outcome.

So, let yourself be full, of anticipation, of spirit. Wait with it, rest with it. Let it be born in its time. Carry it with you – full, laden, swelling – everywhere you go. Even as we anticipate the birth of the Son, let the spirit of the Mother walk with you.