

Advent 4, Year B  
Luke 1: 26-38

Trinity Episcopal Church  
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Mary's Haunting Question:  
A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Susan Allison-Hatch

“How can this be?” the young girl from Nazareth asks when the angel tells her she is about to have a child. “How can this be?” she asks when she learns that the child will rule a land and that his reign will never end. “How can this be?”

I wonder how Mary asked that question. I wonder what lay behind her words. Was she focusing on the technical aspects of it all? Was she wondering just how a teenager like herself—betrothed, promised, but not yet married—could conceive a child? Or was there more to her question? Perhaps she wondered how she would get through it all. Perhaps she worried about being cast-off by both Joseph and her family. Maybe she feared being stoned. A child born out of wedlock was convincing proof of adultery. Women caught in adultery were often stoned to death. Perhaps there was some fear lurking around that question.

I wonder if something else was there as well. I wonder if Mary was asking, “Who me, a peasant girl from Nazareth, a place so far from the center of power that it doesn't even appear on maps? How could I be the mother of the Son of God? How can this be?”

This story of Mary is one we know well. The angel suddenly appearing. The greeting. “Most favored one.” The announcement. Mary's poignant question. The angel's reassurance. Mary's response, “Let it be with me according to your will.” It's easy to slide from the greeting to the assent and miss the haunting question in the middle of the story.

But it's that question that links us to this story. It's the gate through which we enter. “How can this be?” That's Mary's question and ours as well. “How can this be?” we ask as we remember Jesus' call to feed his sheep and then look at the lines of hungry people waiting at food pantries throughout our country. “How can this be?” we wonder as we sing the words of the carol “Peace on earth, good will towards all” and then look at wars erupting all over our earth. “How can this be?” we ask when obstacles seem insurmountable.

“How will we get through this?” we ask when the path ahead appears littered with boulders. “What will our retirement look like?” we wonder as we watch the economy collapse around us. “How will we endure the pain and grief and fear we encounter in our lives?” “How will we get through this?”

“How can this be?” we ask when a diagnosis is delivered or relationship gets rocky or a lay-off is announced. “Is this the end?” we wonder.

“Who me, how can this be?” we ask when we think of our own unworthiness—when we remember the driver we cut off on the way home from work or the fight we just had with our partner or the impatience we feel with our children.

“Who me, how can this be?” we ask when we look at what we bring to this amazing invitation to join with God in giving birth to God’s offspring. There’s no balancing this equation!

And that’s where we can get stuck--focusing on the balancing, focusing on the obstacles outside us and the unworthiness within us. That’s where we miss the core of the story; that’s where we miss the angel’s most amazing promise. “With God nothing is impossible.”

Remember, the angel says to Mary “The power of the Most high will overshadow you.” Mary is not in this alone. And neither are we. We all live in the shadow of God’s embracing wings. We all are held tenderly in God’s loving kindness. (Psalm 36:7).

In the long run, this story about the annunciation, this story about God’s invitation to join with God in bearing God’s child, is not about Mary—it’s about God! God’s kindness and God’s power. God’s tender love for the most vulnerable among us—a teenage girl pregnant out of wedlock; and God’s power to overcome human limitations—a virgin conceiving a child.

There are annunciations in all our lives. They happen all the time. Moments when we are invited to join with God in giving birth to something new and wonderful. Moments filled with darkness and light. Times when we feel vulnerable and afraid. Times of darkness. Times when we wonder, “How can this be?” Times when we’re tempted to say, “Who me?” and then add, “No way.”

What makes the difference in our response? Listening for the answer to the question, “How can this be?”

Hearing the answer the angel gives, “With God nothing is impossible.”

Remembering that, let us say with Mary, “Let it be with us according to your will.” Amen.