

WHO, ME? – DECEMBER 24, 2006

Preached by the Rev. Ruth E. Shaver at the United Church of Schellsburg, Schellsburg, PA
The Fourth Sunday in Advent
Luke 1:39-55, 2:1-7

Time passes so much faster when you have a child to watch growing up. Look at my baby, toddling around after his father in the yard there. He's so strong, my baby – or at least his father lets him think he is for now. Someday, it won't be pretend on my husband's part. Someday, my baby will be as strong as any man can be.

Someday, I fear, he will need to be that strong. Maybe stronger.

My God, what have you done through me? What wonders are you bringing to this world through my son, whom you have bade me call Jesus? Will anyone remember what happened to Joseph, or to me, to bring him into the world, after you have made Jesus the king? Perhaps, like Abraham and Sarah, our story will be told through the ages, gaining and losing details but at its core true, a story that changes history.

My father Boaz and Joseph's father Jacob grew up together in Nazareth. They even got married in the same month – my father says he doesn't remember much about that month, to be honest. Joseph was born exactly nine months later, and his mother kept having babies about every 14 months until there were ten children and she was plum worn out.

My mother, however...

My mother Anna had six children before me, but none of them lived more than a day. The one before me almost killed her, too, but my father prayed in the temple at Jerusalem for seven days straight and she lived.

Perhaps that's why I lived when I was born, because of all my father's prayers. Not just for my mother's life, but for a child, as well. He always told me he wanted a girl who could marry his best friend's first son, but I often wondered if he really wanted a son of his own to be Joseph's best friend.

No matter. Joseph was already a man when I was old enough to be promised to him, already working beside his father at the lathe and the blade to learn the carpenter's trade that has been the family's for at least six generations. It made him somewhat of a laughingstock to be promised to someone so young – him a man of fourteen and me a girl of six – but from all I could know, which was only snippets of information I could overhear between our mothers, he handled it with good humor and patience.

It couldn't have been easy for Joseph, going to weddings of friends and even his younger siblings' weddings, watching as they passed that final mystical boundary between childhood and adulthood and came out of the marriage tent blushing with the knowledge that one gains – or at least pretends to gain – under there. Our fathers took pity on Joseph and let him meet me officially when I was 12 and not yet a woman.

As hard as it might have been for Joseph, all my friends were jealous of me by the time we were old enough to think about boys as more than nuisances. Whenever we went to the well, my friends would drag me all the way around our part of town so we could walk past the carpenters' shop. I would never admit it to them, but I was just as fascinated by the way the young men's bodies moved and glistened as they worked as my girlfriends were. I don't mind admitting now that all of us allowed our gazes to linger on Joseph longer than the others. He was, well, older and more...defined than his younger brothers.

And only promised, not betrothed or married unlike his younger brothers.

At least not until I became a woman. As soon as my purity rituals were completed, the promise became a full engagement. Joseph and I were bound together by a sacred covenant, one made with God as our witness before the synagogue and to be completed in a year's time. To end the covenant would require divorce, a hard thing for a woman – or a man – to bear in this part of the country.

That night, I was so happy I couldn't sleep. What happened then might have been a dream, otherwise. I wasn't sure it wasn't a dream until later, as it was.

I was alone on the roof that night, trying to sleep out under the stars like I prefer. When it suddenly got brighter, I thought perhaps something had caught on fire and started for the stairs to wake my parents. But a voice – no, voices, a hundred, a thousand, a million, I don't know how many – voices called me by name and I froze in my tracks, terrified to turn to see what or who had summoned me.

The voices called again. I turned, as slowly as I could, only to see what I could only guess was the archangel Gabriel standing on my roof.

I wanted to be dreaming.

It would be much easier to explain in the morning.

"Mary," one voice said, the voice I would hear for the rest of the interview.

"I-I am M-m-mary."

"Fear not, Mary. You have found favor with God."

And then Gabriel told me something fantastic, something that had anyone else told me they'd been told, I'd have said they had got soft in the head.

I was to be the mother of the Son of God, the new and true king of Israel.

I, a virgin.

I knew then why Sarah laughed when she heard the angel say she would become a mother under equally unlikely circumstances. I wanted to ask, "Who, me?"

But somehow, I didn't laugh, nor did I ask the question. A peace settled over me, a peace like I had never known before, and instead of laughing, I said, "Yes."

Nothing happened then, except that the song welling in my heart burst from my lips, melody and words like water cascading over the rocks of a waterfall.

I sang that song for days, driving my mother crazy with my incessant noise. She must have been relieved beyond measure to get word from someone other than me about her cousin Elizabeth's pregnancy because it gave her the perfect excuse to send me away like I'd been asking since Gabriel told me of the miracle baby growing in Elizabeth's womb.

Elizabeth, I knew, would understand.

Oddly enough, though, it was Zechariah who truly understood. When I told Elizabeth of Gabriel's visit, she said the child inside her jumped for joy. When I told Zechariah, however, he nodded wisely and scribbled on his slate. Elizabeth read it to me.

"Behold, a young woman has conceived, and shall bear a son. His name shall be called Emmanuel."

"But I'm not pregnant," I said. I remember smoothing my robes over my belly.

Zechariah laughed his silent laugh and winked at me, then scribbled something more.

"Yes, you are, Mary," Elizabeth read.

And indeed, I was. It was as Gabriel had said, the Holy Spirit had come over me, and I was carrying a child even though I was, indeed, a virgin.

I stayed to help Elizabeth deliver her baby. I had never been present at a birth before and as I left to return to Nazareth a few days later, I wondered if the birth of my child would be as...hard...as John's had been.

I should have been worried about Joseph's reaction.

There hadn't been time to talk to him before I left – and really, what could I have said to him then?

I didn't have to say anything to him when I got home. It was obvious to anyone who looked carefully.

And he and I both knew he wasn't the father.

Our parents assumed he was, despite the story I told them. They weren't all that upset, really; two of Joseph's nephews were born before their parents' final marriage ceremony and one of his nieces was born only a couple of months after her parents' marriage. The betrothal period is so close to marriage that many families turn a blind eye to what happens before the marriage tent gets set up.

But Joseph did care.

He cared a lot.

At first, he was very, very angry. At me, and then when I told him what had happened, at whomever had played such a horrible trick on me.

Despite his father's advice, Joseph decided to divorce me. He went to the local council to start the process just before sundown one day. The head of the council said to come back the next day with two witnesses who could attest to my unfaithfulness.

That night, Joseph came to see me. He wasn't really angry anymore, just very sad. It was the first time he said that he loved me. And then he told me he couldn't trust me anymore.

I was devastated. How could this be happening, I screamed at God after Joseph left. You can't possibly mean for me to raise your chosen king by myself!

God answered my prayer, even though I had spoken it in anger.

Instead of going back to the council with two witnesses the next morning, Joseph came to my house and asked to see me again.

My father almost didn't let him because he knew how upset I was, but Joseph must have pleaded his case well because he came charging up the stairs to the roof two at a time with the most amazed look on his face.

"Mary, Mary, I believe you! I had a dream..."

And so it was that, instead of being a divorced woman with a child on the way, I was an expectant mother with a doting husband in all but the final details.

Joseph took such tremendous care of me as I grew bigger over the next several months. He rubbed my back when it ached and bathed my feet when I could no longer bend over to reach them myself. He made a beautiful cradle for our child and some very clever toys for the baby to play with.

Then word came that the census Caesar had planned for many years was finally going to happen and the whole country tensed, wondering what else that census would entail.

No one was prepared to have to travel. Apparently, Caesar had it in mind to find out more than just numbers; he wanted to know what powerful families and tribes might still exist in each part of his empire. So Joseph and his entire family – and mine, too – were required to go to Bethlehem. If we had been allowed to go all together, it would have been much easier. But the census was divided by age groups, so that Joseph had to be in Bethlehem with his wife and any surviving children just at the time that our baby – God’s baby – was due.

We bought a donkey for the journey, a long-earned animal with big brown eyes that seemed wise beyond any measure. He plodded along with the gentlest of gaits, carrying me when I needed to ride and walking beside us when I needed to walk. It took three long days to get to Bethlehem, and then when we got there...

There was no room at the inn. And to make matters worse, my contractions had started.

It wasn’t until the very last inn we tried in town that an innkeeper’s wife suggested we could use their stable, which was at least warm and dry if not clean and pleasant smelling. She apologized that I’d have to give birth in such awful conditions. Joseph assured her that any shelter was better than none as the first long, hard contraction hit and I screamed in agony beside him.

The innkeeper’s wife was so very kind as she did everything she could to help between her duties with her other customers. Her daughter, who had charge of the stable, ran back and forth all night long as the baby’s time came closer and closer, bringing hot water and clean rags and fetching her mother whenever she could be spared from the inn to help me through the worst parts.

Joseph did something no man ever does now: attend a birth. He wasn’t helpful at all with the practical things, but there was nowhere to send him as I had shooed Zechariah out of Elizabeth’s birthing room. So he cradled my head and held my hands as the pains came. Soon enough, our son – God’s Son – came into the world with a lusty cry, and we counted two of all the right things and ten fingers and ten toes...as if God’s Son could be anything except a perfect child to do the things God has planned for him.

Shepherds came late in the night, searching for the child an angel had told them was in a manger wrapped in swaddling clothes. If you must know, they caught me in mid-diaper change, but I suppose that’s close enough for God’s purposes. I think it was right at that

moment that I really began to understand what my child, my son, might mean to the world. If angels announced his birth to shepherds in a field, then he must be the most important child in hundreds of years, maybe in history. Not even baby John had a birth announcement like that!

Even so, there were customs to uphold. We had to wait in Bethlehem until Jesus could be named and circumcised on the eighth day.

Because we were already in Bethlehem, we were able to take Jesus to the Temple to be named and circumcised. Simeon and Anna, two old mystics with rheumy eyes and croaking voices, pronounced blessings over my son and proclaimed him a light to the world. I still don't know exactly what to make of that.

Nor do I know what to make of the men in regal attire who showed up out of nowhere just after we returned to Bethlehem that night. There were six or eight of them who said they were sages and magicians from the far eastern part of the world. They brought unusual gifts with them – gold, frankincense, and myrrh – and told us that they had been searching the heavens for many, many years for a sign that would lead them to a king who would be the savior of all people.

Gold I can understand, for a king needs his gold. But frankincense and myrrh are burial spices and I can't fathom why my son needs burial spices if he's to be a great king of Israel when he grows up. Perhaps I don't want to know, either. God has not seen fit to reveal everything to me, and there is, I think, mercy in that if I'm to live to see him fulfill his destiny.

Herod knows something, enough to be afraid, which frightens me no end. Herod is a petty, jealous despot who craves power like I craved olives the entire time I was carrying Jesus. What Herod wants, Herod usually gets – and Herod apparently wants my son dead.

After the magi left, Joseph had a dream that warned him not to return to Nazareth right away but to go to Egypt, where we would all be safe from Herod's search. I've heard rumors of what Herod has done to the small boys in Judea and Galilee. He's like Pharaoh of Moses' time, trying to stop the inevitable from happening. And we've been passed over into Egypt instead of out of Egypt, which is an interesting twist in God's story that I don't pretend to understand.

But then, I don't pretend to understand any of this, really. Who am I to have been chosen by God to be the vessel for his Son to be born into this world? I'm just an ordinary girl, barely a woman, from an ordinary family in Nazareth. We're faithful Jews living under Roman rule, trying to stay out of trouble in an era when revolutionaries and self-proclaimed messiahs pop up

about every six months. We go to Jerusalem for Passover, except this year because we're here in Egypt, and maybe next year because we might still be in Egypt.

I hope not. I don't want Jesus' first brother or sister to be born in Egypt. I want to go home, to Nazareth, and have all the rest of my babies there where they can be rocked to sleep in the cradle Joseph made for our firstborn, dandled on their grandfathers' knees and sung to by their grandmothers as they're bathed and clothed each morning. I want Jesus to grow up in his own country, surrounded by the desert and the mountains, the lakes and rivers that mark the land of the Hebrew people. I want him to know his people, for if he is to be king someday...

Is that a king, grinning up at his father from the dirt, a king with sawdust in his hair and cedar sap between his fingers?

Who am I to be the mother of a king? God? Who, me?