

The Improbable Bearers of Hope: David, Mary, and Us

A sermon preached by the Rev. Canon Joanna C. Leiserson at Christ Church Cathedral, Cincinnati, Ohio, on Sunday, December 21, 2008.

We don't know much about Mary, only that she was young, engaged to a man named Joseph, and was probably an ordinary but faithful Jew of working class or rural background. Scripture says very little about her life after Jesus is born, except that she seems to have been a doting mother to Jesus. She worried sick when she thought he got lost during a pilgrimage. She took him to weddings. She kept tabs on him in his daily wanderings as an itinerant preacher, even when it seemed like he dismissed his family connections by proclaiming the crowds around him to be family. And at the end, she stayed with him all the way up to his death, when she stood at the foot of the cross weeping for him.

We know quite a bit more about David. We know that he had great looks, played great music, and was a great military commander. If you read the books of Samuel more closely, you will also find out that he was (to use today's language) a kind of mob boss who ran a protection racket and killed off all his enemies. He also committed adultery and then had the woman's husband killed to cover up the fact that he made her pregnant. And he was a pretty skillful politician—so skillful that all of his political rivals—including Saul, all of Saul's sons, and most of David's own sons—ended up either dead or out of the way, with David conveniently somewhere else when all of these murders happened. David was no fairy-tale Prince Charming. The Bible is quite honest about him and makes no attempt to sugarcoat his life and his sins.

As a new king, David wants to repay God who he rightly credits with putting him on the throne. Since David, who had spent years in hiding or on the road as a guerilla fighter against his enemies, now has a nice house of his own, he wants to thank God by building God his own house—meaning, a temple. To our eyes, it is a nice idea and a nice gesture, and perfectly understandable for David to do this. It is less understandable that David would be so beloved of God, given his questionable moral record. God's answer to David is, "You don't make me a house. I will make *you* a house. In fact, I will make *of you* a house." This would be the house and lineage of David, from which the Messiah is to arise. Why would God take David's house, as flawed a character as he is, and make it the lineage of the Messiah, a kingdom that will be established forever?

Apparently people have had the same kind of reservation about Mary being chosen to be the "mother of God." She is so ordinary that popular religious tradition has tried to idealize or even deify her, saying that she was born without the stain of original sin, for example (that's the doctrine of Immaculate Conception), or that she remained a virgin all her life so that no other child would have profaned the womb that carried the Christ, or that at the end of her life she was assumed—that is, taken up bodily—into heaven. To our eyes, it would seem more reasonable for God to have chosen a more miraculous or supernatural figure to bear and raise the Son of God. How could the

redeeming of all creation rest on a mere human being, let alone on the decision of a young girl?

In fact, why would God entrust the work of salvation to *any* human being, as faulty a creation as we are?

Today is the fourth Sunday of Advent. We have spent the past month preparing for the coming of Christ—preparing to celebrate his birth in Bethlehem, and preparing to receive him in our hearts. “O holy child of Bethlehem,” we’ll sing, “descend to us, we pray. Cast out our sin and enter in, be born in us today.”

Chances are, even with our best efforts, none of us has succeeded this Advent in being worthy dwellings that we think God would want for the holy Child to be born in us. Probably more than once, we’ve spoken angrily or impatiently to someone, or acted ungenerously while hurrying through the mall. Or we’ve taken a box of scotch tape home from the office to wrap our Christmas gifts. Or maybe once again, we gave in to over-shopping and let our greed and materialism triumph over prayerful Advent preparation. Or maybe we’ve even gotten drunk and acted stupidly, or cheated on our taxes. Even in our best selves, we are still sinners.

The metaphor of our Advent lives may be this story that I once read in the newspaper, about a man who began the season cheerfully planning to ready his house for Christmas. He got out the outdoor lights, only to find that his wife had just boxed them up in a tangled ball last year. Swearing, he laid them out on the driveway and was straightening them out when his daughter drove up onto the driveway and ran over them. Angrily, he yelled at her to get in the house, and he threw the lights into the garbage. Then he went into the house, got his shotgun, and went back outside to his back yard so he could let out steam by shooting some rounds. The noise aggravated the neighbors, who called the police on him and thoroughly ruined his holiday spirit. The Advent spirit of quiet reflection, expectation and hope gets away from us so easily!

How prepared are we today to receive the Messiah? How could God choose any of *us* to bear the Son of God in our hearts, or to be God’s hands and feet in the world, or to bring Christ to others?

And yet, God trusts us to do all of these things, and not in spite of our humanness and our failings. God apparently trusted that David, with all his failings—large as they were—was worthy to be the ancestor of the Messiah. God trusted that Mary, in her ordinariness, was worthy to be his mother, and to raise him and teach him and nurture him in the ways of the world. And God trusted even that the Son of God could be *born* as a human being and to live *with* us, sharing with us all of the limitations that humans have as creatures of this earth. And finally, God trusts each of us to carry the holy Child within us and to be the face of that Child to the world, asking that we bear the hope of peace and salvation to everybody we meet. To the eyes of conventional wisdom, this looks impossible. But to the eyes of faith, God has turned the world upside down and made all things possible.

Our job is simple. Because God has entrusted us to carry Christ within us, let us make sure that, when he comes to our hearts this Christmas, there will be room for him—and that when he brings the hope of the Kingdom to us, we are willing to carry that hope to a world that so desperately awaits it. And we do it in the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.