

Folks, Merry Christmas to you all. The service is now on our YouTube and Facebook pages. The links are:

<https://www.facebook.com/WestFlamChurch/>

https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCneF9IOARvh5R30Fzm-1ySA?view_as=subscriber

The Christmas Eve service was recorded today (December 20) and will be available on Thursday (Christmas Eve). Blessings, Ian

***Mary and the House of David
Luke 1:26-38
December 20, 2020***

The Christmas story traces its origins as far back as the Genesis story of Adam and Eve. It's more direct connection comes from the story of David and his desire to build a house for God. We connected with this David story today in our reading. We learned that God refused David's request and offered the mysterious promise of a Davidic house that would continue long after his death into the future. Yes, Solomon, David's son by Bathsheba would build this amazing temple, but God's promise to David is more far reaching than the physical temple whose final end came in 70 AD. No, God himself the prophet tells David, is going to build you a house and it will last forever.

I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come forth from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever.

Let's skip over a few hundred years of Israel's history to this teenager called Mary. The angel tells her that God favours her and that she doesn't need to be afraid.

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. He will be great... and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor

David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.

You might wonder how a teenage pregnancy could be considered a favour. She is engaged to an older man, probably a widower with several children, and with whom she has had no physical relations. I doubt the Jewish inhabitants of the tiny, rural village of Nazareth would have welcomed a pregnant Mary with open arms. So just how this is a blessing for Mary is not immediately apparent to the dumbstruck girl. But it will become clearer what is really going on as the plan unfolds.

Notice that the son she is to have will inherit the throne of David and will rule over Jacob/David's house forever. Yes, you guessed it; the same house promised to David's descendents is to be embodied in the Son of Mary. So now we get the connection! David's throne and David's house are spiritual so that the physical temple is merely a ***symbol of God's eternal kingdom***. God never intended to restrict God's presence to one place, but the temple would become a symbol of that presence. Now with the birth of this baby God's presence and blessing will be located in this person born to Mary. His kingdom will survive all history and finally be revealed at the end of time, as we know it.

And so we see that this promise of the angel is closely tied to the long history of God's people: Abraham, the patriarchs and David. What a strange God emerges from this story! It's all such an unlikely plot! If we had written the story it would have been very different. We certainly wouldn't have made the transition point in the plot an obscure peasant girl from a remote village in Galilee. But as the angel told Mary, "nothing is impossible with God."

But we might want to ask ourselves this question: ***Does God still interrupt people's lives today like he did that day for Mary? Another way of asking might be, do we imagine that God is an active character in the story of our lives?***

Or is the answer no! Did God really remove herself from this earthly dimension into the mysterious, upper regions of the other dimension after Jesus accomplished the mission? Is God active in our lives or not? Or is God distant, untroubled, disinterested and/or unaware of

our daily struggles? It's a fair question! And I suspect that many of us here today sometimes live as if this is true!

Truth is, if we are to take the story seriously, we have to confess that the angel who burst unexpectedly into the life of this teenager Mary continues to intersect with our lives in surprising and often unsuspecting ways. God doesn't just watch over our lives like a distant schoolmaster just waiting to punish our petty sins. God in Jesus is with us at the very heart of all the messiness and complexity of our lives.

On another note, we ought to notice that Mary is a wonderful example of obedience and service. But for many of us Protestants as well as Catholics she is somewhat elusive. Protestants in particular don't know what to do with her, especially with all the supernatural qualities added to the young innocent girl by Roman Catholic decrees. Among such decrees Protestants find it particularly difficult to swallow the notions that Mary was free from sin throughout life; that she remained a virgin to the end of her life; that she didn't die a natural death but was taken directly to heaven like the prophet Elijah; that she is now the mediator between us and Jesus. None of that seems credible to us Protestants in the 21st century, if ever!

So, who is Mary for us? You may have seen her trapped in a snow dome, a plastic figure you take out of the box of ornaments to decorate the house at Christmas. For many Protestants, Mary rarely enters the liturgy or music of our churches, except during Advent and Christmas. For the rest of the year, she is a distant, elusive figure still trapped in the snow dome, and disconnected from our faith. Perhaps both reducing Mary to the birth story, as we do, and the Catholic adoration of Mary, needs a little correction. Scripture certainly gives no support to the excessive claims of perpetual virginity, her immaculate conception (1854), or her assumption into heaven (1950).

But Mary is important and an example of courage, faith and service to God. Only Luke, by the way, gives us a portrait of Mary's humanity. He lets her out of the snow dome, full of emotions, skepticism, doubt and fear. She ponders all these things that happen to her as a young teenager and for the rest of her life tries to make some sense of it all. At one point she gathers the family, Jesus' brothers and sisters, and

tries to persuade him to come home and live a quiet life in Nazareth. Things were heating up too much for her son and she fears for his life. But she continues to follow him right up to the cross and beyond.

I've told you before about our trip to Ephesus. Tradition tells us that she lived out her days there with her new adopted son John that Jesus from the cross established. The house apparently where she lived is venerated. The day we arrived there happened to be August 15th. This is the date that was set aside by Pope John-Paul in 1980's as a pilgrimage place to Mary's shrine. The crowds were lined up a long way back so we waited and finally arrived to pay our respects to Mary's memory. Even a hardened Protestant like me couldn't help feeling just a little humbled and spiritually touched by this veneration.

If we had read on in Luke, we would have heard again that magnificent song of praise that Luke puts in her mouth. Listen to her sing: ***My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed... He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.***

Luke wants us to see Mary as a champion of the faith, full of life, truth and courage. While she may not have understood the richness of her role in the incarnation, in the life, death and resurrection of her son Jesus, she does more fully, like his followers, after the resurrection event. Luke wants us to see her as the mature woman of faith who speaks powerfully of justice and peace that her son has opened up. She may also have understood her role as mother of the one who carries forward the promise of David's house and kingdom living on into eternity. Jesus is the one who guarantees that David's kingdom is eternal. She may not have understood all this perfectly but I suspect she grasped it in her heart. She is no quiet, passive woman but one who believes in shaking up the status quo, both political and religious. So let's capture her faith with these words we say together:

I am favoured by God. Indeed, God wants to do great

things through me. One of those things may be...

Because the God of Mary and Jesus is still active, I believe God is still at work in the world, even through me.

Though I don't always understand how and why God is at work, I can still answer, "Here am I, a servant of the Lord. Let it be with me according to your word."

Amen