Sunday, December 19, 1999
THE MYSTERY OF CHRISTMAS (No. 2 in a Series)
Luke 1:26-38

In last Sunday's sermon on "The Mystery of Christmas," I noted that although the word "mystery" does not appear in any of the birth stories of Jesus, there is a lot of mystery involved with Christmas, and that's part of its charm. Christmas is filled with mystery because we have almost no details about Jesus as a baby and his growing up into an adult.

The fact is, the early church for several hundred years did not celebrate his birth. In spite of our lack of knowledge about Jesus, he is one of the pivotal figures in the history of the human race. That's a mystery.

Today, in the second sermon in this two-part series on the mystery of Christmas, we are going to consider the mystery of Christmas through the mother of Jesus, Mary. There is as much mystery surrounding her or maybe even more than there is around her son.

When you think of Mary, the mother of Jesus, what image comes into your mind? A sweet, innocent young woman? A peasant girl? Or do you think of those many kinds of statues of Mary that are seen in churches or in religious bookstores?

There's a lot of mystery surrounding Mary. Like her son, Jesus, she is nowhere physically described in the New Testament stories, so we have no idea as to her appearance. We do not know whether she was tall or short, whether she had a light complexion or dark complexion. We know nothing about the family in which she grew up. Did she have brothers or sisters? We don't know. How old was she when Jesus was born? We are given no hint. How did she meet Joseph, her husband? We don't know. What happened to her after the death and resurrection of Jesus? The four gospels give us no information about her following Easter.

The Apostle Paul, who wrote most of the New Testament in the form of letters to churches, doesn't even mention her name. He refers to her only indirectly. Here's his statement about her in his letter to the Galatians, "When the time had fully come, God sent the Son, born of woman, born under the law." That's it.

However, there are many traditions about Mary which grew up alongside the New Testament. Most of them describe her as a devout young peasant woman, probably fifteen, sixteen, or seventeen years old when she became pregnant with Jesus. According to these traditions, her mother's name was Ann. Still another tradition holds that her husband Joseph died before she did and that she had to raise the family as a single parent. The New Testament does mention that Jesus had at least four brothers and two sisters. One of his brothers named James was a respected leader in the early church in Jerusalem following the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Even though the New Testament doesn't tell us much about Mary, two of the gospels, Matthew and Luke, open with what scholars have come to call "infancy narratives," stories that begin not long before Jesus's birth and take us through his first days and years.

Matthew's story wants to show that Jesus's family tree can be traced back to King David, and the only way he can do this is through Mary's husband Joseph. Therefore, he gives Joseph a

more central role in the story of Jesus's birth. It is Joseph who is told in a dream the real identity of Jesus. Mary remains in the background.

Luke's story, however, is quite different. Here, Mary is the central figure. A messenger from God visits her and tells her that she has been chosen by God for a very special purpose. It's all quite mysterious. Sometimes Mary is portrayed as a kind of shy young woman, engaged but not yet married, mystified and trembling before the unheard-of responsibility she is being asked to take on. But as I read her response to God's messenger as recorded in our scripture reading for today, I find her not to be a passive person, but rather one who is not afraid to question God's messenger. She in effect says, and I'm paraphrasing, "Wait a minute, I want to know more about what this means before I get too involved."

From my reading of the story, she is a bright young Jewish woman, down-to-earth and peasant sensible. Like so many other figures in the Jewish Old Testament stories, she is not afraid to question God, who is here represented by the messenger. Luke says, "She was puzzled by the messenger's words and wondered what it all meant." She wanted more information.

Whenever a person gets a message from God saying, in effect, "God has a special job for you to do," it's ok to want more information and to wonder about the implications. We never know for sure what God has in mind for us. I don't know about you, but whenever I have the notion that God is wanting me to do something, I have lots of questions because I know from experience that following God's will can get me into some strange situations. The Bible reminds us, "God's ways are not our ways." Carrying out God's will often means going against the prevailing culture.

After being reassured by the messenger that the birth of her child would be good news for the whole world and there would be nine months of preparation and adjustment, Mary accepted God's assignment. She was not expected to deliver immediately. As time passed, she would become more and more aware of what the birth of this child would mean for the world.

Mary didn't get all the answers to her questions, but she got enough for her to go forward. That's frequently true of God's mysterious ways. The messenger of God gave Mary enough information so that she was able to say, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."

That's the first lesson the mystery of Christmas teaches us through the experience of Mary. We can never know everything about the future or exactly how God might work through us. The more I think about it, who among us would want to know everything about the future in all of its detail? Would you want to know everything that's going to happen to you, the good and bad, including precisely how and when you were going to die? Christmas reminds us that with God there is always mystery, but enough light to walk by.

The mystery of Christmas, as seen through the story of Mary, also tells us that God's purposes and God's glory are revealed through some very unlikely people. There's Elizabeth, John the Baptist, Mary, Joseph, the shepherds, the early followers of Jesus, and even people like you and me. If you examine the family tree of Jesus as Matthew outlines it or Luke, you will also discover that God works through people you and I might not choose.

Luke describes Mary not as a goddess, not as a stiff statue gathering cobwebs in a dusty cathedral, not as a plastic figure molded with a sweet and innocent countenance to stand lifeless in a coffee-table creche. Luke's Mary is a genuine example of faith acted out in

discipleship and response to God's invitation. Without having all the answers in advance, she was willing to let God be born in her. Meister Eckhart said, "We are all meant to be mothers of God. For God is always needing to be born."

I like the mystery of that metaphor — we can all be mothers of God. That's what the fourth verse of the Christmas carol, O Little Town of Bethlehem, tells us, "O holy child of Bethlehem, descend to us we pray; cast out our sin and enter in, be born in us today." That's one of the mysteries of Christmas, we can all be mothers of God.

What does it mean to be a mother of God? In its broadest sense, it means that all of us, male and female, have within us the potential to be creative, to bring new life. We use that metaphor in a number of ways. We talk about giving birth to new ideas. Whenever we are creative in a positive way, we are, in a sense, letting God be born through us. Rabbi Heschel put it this way: "No one is sterile. Every soul is pregnant with the seed of insight. Sometimes it is vague and hidden. In some people, the seed grows; in others, it decays. Some give birth to life, others miscarry it. Some know how to bear, to nurse, to rear an insight that comes into being."

Jesus used the metaphor of mother, as well as brother and sister, to describe those who do the will of God. He said, "Whoever does the will of God is my brother, sister, and mother."

Part of the fun and mystery of Christmas is to figure out new ways to be mothers of God. Therefore, I want to suggest one additional way each one of us can allow God to be born in us during this season and during the rest of the year as well. It's also part of the mystery of Christmas, which is illustrated by Mary. After Mary agreed to God's assignment, she was filled with joy.

Nine months later, when the child is born to Mary, an angel appears to the shepherds and tells them the good news of the birth. The shepherds are at first afraid of the angel, but the messenger assures them, "Do not be afraid, for I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people. To you is born this day a Savior, who is Christ the Lord."

"Good news of great joy!" That's the overall theme of the mystery of Christmas, especially as seen through the experience of Mary. In spite of this, there are more people than we sometimes realize who approach Christmas with apprehension rather than anticipation, with fear instead of joy. For some, it is a sad and lonely time. Sometimes it almost seems as if more people become depressed at this time of year than at any other. Family quarrels increase. Too much drinking, too little sleep, frayed nerves, and exhausting schedules all combine to take away the fun and joy, which is a gift that God wants each one of us to possess and to give.

Some people are sad because the holidays remind them of all the people gone from them: parents who have died, spouses who have died, children who have grown up and gone away, friends who have moved away, and families who cannot be together.

Then too, for some adults, there is the reality that Christmas can never be the kind of magical and mysterious holiday it was for them as children. So there is a lot of regretting at this time of year. There are attempts by people to recapture the old feelings by spending large amounts of money on gifts, and this device works for a while for some. But the newness of the gifts wears off, and life returns to its normal routine.

There is also the unbearable melancholy that afflicts some people during this season. This is partly rooted in the misguided notion that everyone is hysterically happy as Christmas

approaches, and by comparison, we don't feel as joyous, and we wonder why. Is there something wrong with us?

Here's where I think the mystery of Christmas as seen through the experience of Mary can help us. The story of the birth of Jesus has never implied that life has no problems — that there is no sorrow or evil in the world. There is nothing in the Christmas story to make us turn the manger into a Disneyland scene. The gospels tell us of new parents who had to run away to Egypt soon after the baby was born and of all little boy babies being killed in the region of Bethlehem and beyond.

Yet there's a deep joy that can be experienced by all of us. It is a joy that can be spread to others. It's the joy that Mary expressed in her song when she visited her cousin Elizabeth, who was pregnant with John the Baptist. "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; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name."

The mystery of Christmas celebrates the deep joy that comes from the knowledge that God is with us, that God can be born in and through us, that each one of us, like Mary, can be a mother of God. I believe deep down in every one of us we know this about Christmas almost intuitively, and that's why the churches are filled during this season. We want to experience that deeper joy. We want to be mothers of God.

Thomas Cahill, in his new book Desire of the Everlasting Hills, has this to say about the mystery of Christmas: "It is a dramatization of the simple triumphs of common humanity, in which joy at a baby's birth can overcome the most grievous official oppressions, and even pedestrian aggravations of ordinary life. 'When a woman is in labor,' the adult Jesus will remind us in John's Gospel, 'she suffers all the pain that is necessary to this experience. But then her baby is born; and the intensity of her sufferings is wiped from her memory — because of the joy she possesses in having brought a new human being into the world.'"

That same joy can be ours this Christmas as we once again let God be born in and through us. Amen.