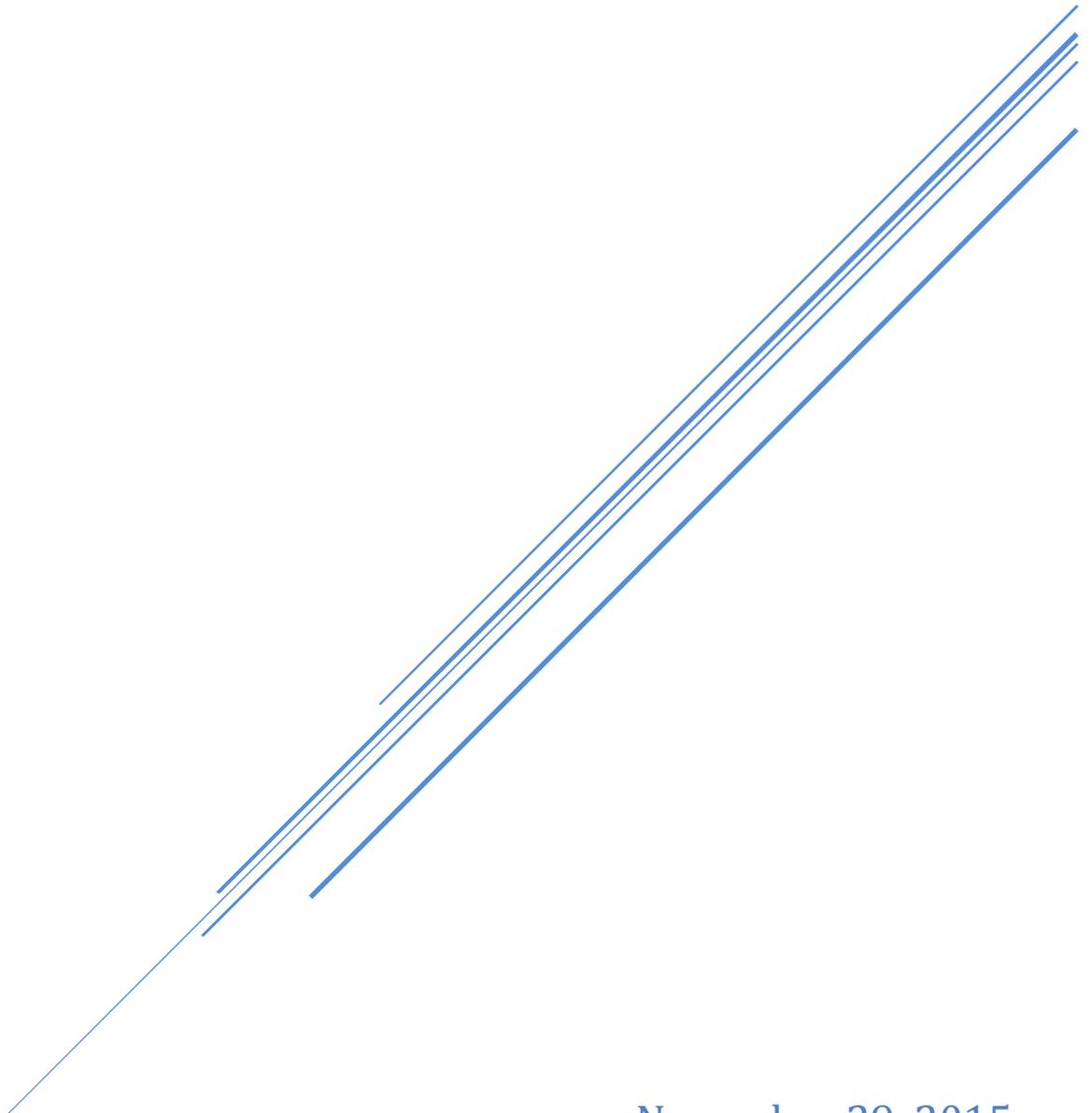


I BELIEVE IN THE SUN...

...even when it's not shining.

--*Luke 1:26-38*



November 29, 2015
BCUMC/CCUMC

*Peace Child,
in the sleep of the night
in the dark before light
you come,
in the silence of stars
in the violence of wars --
Savior, your name.*

*Peace Child,
to the road and the storm
to the gun and the bomb
you come,
through the hate and the hurt,
through the hunger and dirt --
bearing a dream.*

*Peace Child,
to our dark and our sleep
to the conflict we reap
now come --
be your dream born alive,
held in hope, wrapped in love:
God's true shalom.*

-- Shirley Erena Murray

So the angel Gabriel appears to Mary and says, "Greetings, favored one." Favored one? Seriously? My guess is that Mary didn't feel very 'favored' when she heard the news that Gabriel came to tell her.

When the angel first greeted her, Mary's initial response was not, "Let it be with me according to your word." No, the first thing it says, "...she was much perplexed" – the Greek word translates, *greatly troubled* by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be." In fact, she was perplexed enough that Gabriel had to repeat himself "Do not be afraid – no, really -- you have found favor with God." And poor Mary hadn't even heard the real news, yet.

Scholars think Mary was probably around 12 or 13 years old. Besides being very young, we know that in first century Jewish culture, a girl who became pregnant out of wedlock was in serious trouble -even danger. Best case scenario, she would become the object of widespread scorn. Worst case – as in certain contemporary cultures who still practice 'honor killings' – she could be stoned to death by the very

people who raised her. Everything she had could be on the line by Mary saying 'yes' to this – her reputation, her marriage, her very life. Favored one?

And the angel Gabriel left out something kind of important. In all the talk about Jesus being Son of the most high and having the throne of the ancestor David, the angel never once mentioned that this baby would grow up to be hated -- persecuted, scourged, and crucified.

Turns out being God's favored one required Mary to be profoundly counter-cultural. And to trust an inner vision that flew in the face of everything that her village expected of her. Favored one...is it such a good thing?

Now, there's another thing about this story that can really get to people – one way or another – and we rarely talk about it. Like the elephant in the room. A virgin birth...? Could it happen? Did it happen? There's no proof, but we have faith. The word translated 'virgin' -- *parthenos* in Greek – is also translated elsewhere as 'marriageable maiden, unmarried daughter, and young woman.' People will disagree about it – and have for two thousand years – and the church hasn't gone anywhere.

Don't get me wrong, I think we need to treat the question of the virgin birth very seriously. There's just no need to get hung up on it. Neither the gospel of Mark nor the Gospel of John – not even the prolific writings of Paul in all his letters -- ever thought it was important enough to mention this little detail of the virgin birth. Or any birth for that matter. This means that several different communities of believers could preach and teach and learn and worship Jesus without making the virgin birth an actual article of faith about him.

Frederick Buechner – I haven't quoted him in a few weeks – sums it up beautifully: "If you believe God was somehow in Christ, it shouldn't make much difference to you how he got there. If you don't believe, it should make less difference still. In either case, life is complicated enough without confusing theology with gynecology."

Have you ever struggled with periods of confusion, disbelief, darkness or despair? Have you ever looked at or been faced with a situation in your life where you thought, "how can this be, I just can't.... It's not possible."

As I sat alone in my dark apartment, I knew I needed to change everything. I've talked about this before. I'd been through in-patient detox and rehab for alcohol

and substance abuse three times -- in 15 years. I just couldn't quit. I could not do it. It was impossible.

But if it was so impossible – if I was so convinced that I'd never get clean, why didn't I just end it all – why bother? Something told me there was one more thing I hadn't tried – not completely – not wholeheartedly – with total abandon....

One tiny light in the dark night of the soul changed my entire life. I didn't even recognize the spark until much later. God made me a youth leader? Trusted to take kids on trips – to have the keys to the church van – to the whole church even?!?!? Me, a pastor?!?!? But I never felt like I was favored by God. I wonder if Mary did... I call it my 'brief moment of clarity.' Perhaps it was a moment of light in the dark night of my soul.

There's that phrase that keeps popping up in today's readings and message. It sounds somehow intriguing and philosophical. You may have heard the phrase before. It sounds deep, but what is it?

I love what F. Scott Fitzgerald wrote: "In a real dark night of the soul it is always three o'clock in the morning".

Dark Night of the Soul is the title of a poem written by 16th-century Spanish poet and Roman Catholic mystic Saint John of the Cross, as well as a treatise he wrote later, commenting on the poem."

"Saint John of the Cross' poem narrates the journey of the soul from its bodily home to its union with God. The journey is called "The Dark Night", because darkness represents the hardships and difficulties the soul meets in detachment from the world and reaching the light of the union with the Creator."

The main idea of the poem can be seen as the painful experience that people endure as they seek to grow in spiritual maturity and union with God.

These feelings of spiritual emptiness are natural. Simon & Garfunkel wrote the classic words of "The Sound of Silence" that starts "Hello darkness my old friend, I've come to talk with you again." Everyone, sooner or later, will have a 'Dark Night of the Soul.'

God has not abandoned you. You may not feel like God's 'favored one,' but I promise, you are, and God is with you.

Until a collection of Mother Teresa's private letters was published in 2007, we all thought she was living a life of pure joy. Turns out that for most of her public ministry, Theresa suffered ongoing feelings of desolation and abandonment by God.

"I am told God lives in me," she wrote, "and yet the reality of darkness and coldness and emptiness is so great that nothing touches my soul."

Her 'dark night' was unusually long, but the theory is that all Christians experience it. It's necessary, and it's unique to the individual. Some people experience it through external circumstances – nothing goes right, or they find themselves afflicted or persecuted. Some experience it through temptations – drugs and alcohol, pride, vanity, porn; and all your cries to God for help seem to go unheeded.

Did Mary, I wonder, experience that despair? Some kind of dark night of the soul before she ever started to feel like God's favored one?

Before Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word;" Before she sang the Magnificat – the Canticle of Mary we all recited -- before all that, and after she was reassured by Gabriel that this was no joke, her first spoken response to the surprising and rather unlikely news was, "How can this be? -- I've never even been with boy!" I can't – it's impossible!

Why the change of heart? How long did Mary struggle with the news before she came to terms with it and accepted it as a blessing -- as a spark of light in an otherwise dark -- even desperate situation? Mary's last words in this passage are "Let it be according to your word." Do you wonder if that's Mary sort of saying, "Fine – whatever!" and resigning herself to something over which she has no control?

Do you think she felt violated at all? How long did it take before Mary actually felt as if she was "God's favored one?"

Even though an angel actually appeared to her – in person -- he left Mary to deal with it on her own, and then what? Was Mary like, "God? You got me into this – now where are you?"

How long do you think it took Mary when she said "Let be with me according to your word," to go from meaning, "Fine – whatever," to "Make it so!" in the words and style of Captain Picard of Star Trek?

Our Advent theme this year is “I Believe, Even When...” I read a story about light in the midst of darkness -- something you might have thought impossible. Last year, about this time, a lone, armed terrorist entered a café in Sydney, Australia taking a number of employees and customers hostage. Early in the crisis, the police confirmed reports that the hostage taker was an Iranian born man who called himself Sheikh Haron.

As news of the siege unfolded, a woman named Rachel was on a commuter train on her way to work, scrolling through updates on her smart phone, when she noticed a woman on the train, apparently Muslim, start to fiddle with her headscarf – starting to unpin it to take it off.

Rachel felt tears come to her eyes, feelings of sadness and anger, and she decided to speak up about the victims of the siege who were NOT in the café – victims who were ordinary, law-abiding Muslims, living in the city and going about their business.

She posted a Facebook status update that read: “...and the (presumably) Muslim woman sitting next to me on the train silently removes her hijab. I ran after her at the train station. I said, ‘Put it back on. I’ll walk with you.’ [The woman] started to cry and hugged me for about a minute and then walked off alone.”

Responses to the post came quickly. One said, “This is what good people do.” Another tweeted (posted on Twitter) “If you regularly ride the 373 bus between Coogee and Martin Place, wear religious attire, and don’t feel safe alone, I’ll ride with you.”

Someone else suggested the hash tag (looks like a pound sign) #illridewithyou. And it snowballed from there. In 12 hours, there were more than 150,000 tweets with the hash tag #illridewith you. One woman posted a picture of herself with a blue scarf around her wrist: “I’m a regular on the Mandurah Line. If you see me, #illridewithyou – I’ll be wearing this scarf.” A man posted a picture of a homemade sticker he placed on the side of his briefcase that said, “I’ll ride with you,” and he tweeted, “I’ve made a ...sticker for my bag so people who need me can spot me #illridewithyou.”

A new way to respond to terrorism. Ordinary people doing god’s work. One brief moment of clarity – a spark of light in the darkness. Expect something new. Not only something we don’t expect, but something we can’t even conceive.

“I believe in the Sun, even when it’s not shining. Because, you see, the sun comes back out eventually. It always does. Always. ...amen