Expecting? Advent I Reflection for 29 November 2020
Luke 1:26-38
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How many of you studied Latin in high school or University? Then you will remember that Advent is a word that literally means "to come to." And we know ***what*** is coming at us like a train barrelling down the tracks! In the weeks leading up to Christmas, we can become frantic with all we think we have to do to prepare to celebrate the season of Christmas with family and friends. In some ways, that will be eased by COVID-19 restrictions on how we can gather this year. In other ways, those COVID-restrictions place more pressure on us to have things planned well in advance so we can order presents online, far enough ahead for timely delivery. And to be creative in how we might do special acts of kindness for those with whom we cannot physically share Christmas this year and to think of others for whom we might make Christmas more hopeful.

Advent in this COVID-time calls us to step back, to think about approaching the season that is quickly approaching **<u>us</u>**—***differently***. After all, Advent comes from the same Latin word as our English word "adventure"… so what if we built into the Advent adventure some time to contemplate what it is all about? And that would involve focussing on the birth of the person whose birthday Christmas celebrates.

If it hadn't been for COVID, we would have hosted an Advent Messy Church with activities to send families home with tools to do that! We might have made Christmas ornaments—stars and angels—that are part of the story. Or we could have made Advent chains to count down the days to Christmas, and sent families home with Advent calendars to learn about bringing hope to the world in the days leading up to Christmas. Jan Quinn and I are still considering how we might host a simple Messy Church on Zoom to show the kids how to make nativity puppets from toilet paper rolls, so the children can play-act the story again and again, just as they acted it out in our sanctuary on Christmas Eve last year with costumes and carols. Young people don't soon forget the story which ***they*** bring alive.

As we consider the meaning of Christmas, let's name that the most important character in this drama of Advent and Christmas (other than the baby she delivered), is Mother Mary.

As Protestants, we don't focus much on Mary, and even less on Joseph, her fiancé, but they call on our imagination in this season. Their story starts when a very young Mary, possibly only 14 or 15, finds herself unexpectedly pregnant …. And we wonder how. Yes, the Christian tradition calls hers a virgin birth, but we know how babies are

made and we are not expected in The United Church of Canada to separate our scientific understanding from our faith life.

Next Sunday is the 25th anniversary of the Montreal Massacre of 14 young women, mostly engineering students at Ecole Polytechnique, when Marc Lepine took out his rage on them on December 6, 1989. There has not been a massacre of that proportion since, but violence against women continues.

The United Church endorses the call of the World Council of Churches encouraging us to participate in Amnesty International's 16 Days of Activism to End all forms of sexual and gender based Violence. Amnesty's campaign started on Nov 25, as the United Nations has declared the 25th of EVERY month as a day to focus on their Campaign: UNiTE to End Violence against Women. The UN website says:

> As the world retreated inside houses due to the lockdown measures introduced to curb the COVID-19 pandemic, reports from around the world showed an alarming increase in the already existing pandemic of violence against women.
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> "Accompanying the crisis has been a spike in domestic violence reporting, at exactly the time that services, including rule of law, health and shelters, are being diverted to address the pandemic," said the UN Secretary-General's report "Shared Responsibility, Global Solidarity: Responding to the socio-economic impacts of COVID-19."

Violence against women and children was as much a problem in Mary's day as it is today. Some scholars have even proposed that Mary's pregnancy—denied as the work of Joseph—may have been the result of rape, possibly even by a Roman soldier. Not something the gospel writers would have shouted from the rooftops.

But both she and Joseph are reassured (Joseph in a dream and Mary by a strange visitor) that good would come of this pregnancy, no matter how it began. And both of them not only agreed to cooperate, but—Mary, especially—gave a resounding "YES!" to what was happening to her. We hear her hopes in the Magnificat, the great song she sings to her cousin Elizabeth—that God would pull the mighty down and raise the lowly, filling the hungry with good things and sending the rich away empty. That will be our gospel reading on the 4th Sunday of Advent.

Honourable, Joseph agreed to support and protect Mary and the baby that was not his.

And we know that this baby grew up and became a significant force in the world, one whom we believe pointed to God, revealing as much of God—and God's dream for the world—as anyone has before or since. He was the very fulfillment of Mary's Song of HOPE.

In a brief sermon on YouTube years ago, our Moderator at that time, The Very Rev. Dr. Gary Paterson tells that the Gk Orthodox call Mary “Theotokos” (theo-toe’-kos) —a Greek word meaning “God-bearing.” In O/orthodox theology, Mary—through her flesh —births God, offering space for the uncontained God. Mary is the invitation to bring forth new life, to be open to the Spirit, to be pregnant with God ourselves.

The former Moderator mentioned how Meister Eckhart—a 14th c. German mystic—asked of what use it is that Mary gave birth to Jesus 1400 yrs ago, if we are not also giving birth to God in our time and place. He suggested we can all be mothers of God, as God is ***always*** in need of being born into our midst.

How this brings alive the deep meaning of incarnation! Imagine the uncontained Holy One asking for space in the lives of each of us, waiting for our “Yes!” to the movement of the Holy Spirit, so we might become pregnant with HOPE, “ready for the long, slow growth of possibility, doing the hard labour of giving birth to compassion, peace and justice in our world, where our hearts, minds, hands, and feet become channels for bringing peace into the world… though that may come in strange ways like a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes and placed in a manger.”[i]

This idea that any one of us can become an expectant Mother of God was also expressed by another medieval mystic poet, Angelus Silesius, who wrote:

Ach, könnte nur dein Herz zu einer Krippe werden,
Gott würde noch einmal ein Kind auf dieser Erden.

> [Could but your heart become a manger for his birth,
> God would again become a child upon this earth.][ii]

What are YOU expecting this Christmas? What will you do during Advent to help bring that about?

Let’s talk about it on Sunday morning and let’s reflect on the importance of HOPE in our lives during this pandemic-Advent.

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[i] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2m0EN2mrD80&list=UUKYjQvHY5ndMCmrBjCu-N5A, accessed on 27 November 2020

[ii] Angelus Silesius, Der Cherubinischer Wandersmann 2:53