

Oude Lutherse Kerk, 30 nov 2014 / Lutheran Communion Service in English
The Rev. Dr. Andreas Wöhle

Texts

Is 7, 14-15

Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel.

He shall eat curds and honey by the time he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good.

Lk 1, 26-38

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, 'Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you.' But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour 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 will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob for ever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.' Mary said to the angel, 'How can this be, since I am a virgin?' The angel said to her, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God.'

Then Mary said, 'Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.' Then the angel departed from her.

Sermon

Praise to you, o Christ...

What a strange story, the one Luke tells us about that special moment when a young lady is taken by surprise at the sudden greeting of an angel... Well, angels indeed tend to have this startling and surprising effect on us. However: the young lady could have known that one day this might happen - to her or to whosoever lives with the promises given to Israel, ...

Promises about a child to be born, in who's programmatic name and life-story God him- (or her-)self would be as present as can be in the lives of his people. "*Immanuel*" is the programmatic Hebrew name of hope, in which this promise was transported through time and history in the tradition of Israel. IMMANU – EL: which means as much as: With us (*immanu*) is he - who is GOD (*el*)...

From the times of Isaiah, this had been the iconic shorthand for a tradition of hope, that would carry a people through ages and experiences of darkness and despair rather than lives in glory and wellbeing ...

The Biblical stories and programmatic images of hope have always been the stories of people told AGAINST their immediate experience and the seemingly obvious evidence of history. IMMANUEL – "God with us" – was and is the iconic name and melody, sung AGAINST the much more convincing experience of day to day life, in Israel and all over the world, where one foreign conqueror after the other would rule the land and the lives of people. SHE could have known, the young lady, or let's say: She could have dreamed this situation, - in her faith dreams...

"One day, Gods presence with his people will be imminent, IMMANU-EL, and this will change the world and the people, when evil is refused and the good is chosen..."

But Mary, obviously, didn't know... although in her own name she carried some of the hope-tradition as well: Mary, --- in her own language people would address her as Miriam – named after the sister of Moses and Aaron, woman prophet in the times of old... Mary hears the greetings: *"The Lord is with you!"* But she questions the content of it just as much as the angelic character of the visitor. Too strange to be true: The Lord - to be with HER? This sounds so much like something people (or angel-pretenders) would say out of habit, like we greet those on the street with "Good morning", without ever pondering on whether this is really what we wish them...

"Don't be afraid", the angel tells her. Don't be afraid of God coming close, into your life and putting things upside down, which we have so diligently kept downside up for so long... Don't be afraid of visions becoming promises and hoping for your faith to make them life-changing and world-changing paradigms.

Mary, Maria, Miriam, - she is US: She is US, who live our lives within the settings of societies, ... societies which more or less define for us what can realistically be hoped for, and what will have to stay in the realm of phantasm (or vision if you so like)...

But then there is one thing that makes her different, Mary, and THAT may just as well be the reason why her story has been told and retold by generations and generations of faith people, Christians... (and those who carry her image in other wordings and stories)

To start with: Mary may be perplexed, but she is NOT afraid to the bone ... not afraid of God coming close, and becoming part of her life and her world, as strange as she may find this on first sight.

Mary is the icon and reflection of that part of our faith, - yours and mine -, which dares to open up to Gods promising words, and dares to believe that this world is NOT left to the powers that direct it on a daily basis to wherever there is profit for those in charge. Mary is the image of that part of our faith, -yours and mine -, which makes us feel sick (physically, like morning sickness can be when you're pregnant <I have been told>) ... as we may feel sick about the changes in our Dutch social system, which will become effective as of January 1, 2015 ... Changes that will definitely cause anxiety and will do real harm to the lives of large groups of elderly people, who are entrusted to our care, because they cannot support themselves sufficiently any more, financially and physically. ---

"THERE WILL BE another kind of kingdom and king, and society and way of living with each other", Mary hears. *"And it will start with you, Mary..."* ... and with you... and with you and with me...

YOU ... will be pregnant with images of hope and faith that will change the world of the powerful and mighty to listen to the needs of those in need... and this change starts in your life! YOU will be pregnant - with disturbing ideas of freedom and peace and justice, as much as you may be perplexed by this vision, or afraid of what others might think of you, or of what might happen with your perfectly structured social life, once you start believing that change is what is needed in our society... Changing the world into a place where human life can flourish and become life as intended with creation, in Gods image...

And here comes the other reason why Mary's story is in "the book"... It's her answer to all the impossible things she hears and hopes for and believes despite all odds: It's her answer: **"HERE I AM"** Because in this answer... (the classical answer of all of Gods people in the Biblical stories) In this answer Mary again becomes the image and icon for OUR faith, where we dare to handle it NOT as something that takes place in our minds and thoughts and phantasies... Not as something about - lives to come, about - heavens to wait for us, about - the supernatural or mindblowing realities of theoretic realms of Godly power around us...

In Mary's **"HERE I AM"** we may find the key to what faith in fact is about: It's A LIFE CHOICE: not only to BELIEVE in Gods promise of a life worth living for all people but to BECOME part of that promise ourselves: in the small or great moments - where others experience our care for their needs - where we practice our democratic rights to protest

against rules of whichever law that produce injustice... - where we start bridging gaps between people inside and outside of churches and mosques and synagogues ... in order to recognize each other as children of the same God... who sends angels, on a daily basis, in order to shake up our saturated lives and to make us pregnant with his (or her) vision of a world - worth living in for all the people of God...

May we all get pregnant in that way, in these days of Advent, and support each other when our morning sicknesses make us feel miserable and when we start wandering whether this is really the faith that we want to be pregnant with... unpleasantly as it makes us feel about the world we have co-created and live in....

May we all get pregnant, and start becoming part of the story of God "HERE I AM" a story that has been on its way for quite some time already... and which has changed the lives of so many, in the image and life of Him, who became our brother on the way and who accompanies us through times of darkness and doubt, and who offers us his comforting presence in the communion of the brother-and-sisterhood of sharing bread and wine at the table of the Lord. May this become a life-changing faith experience, and may our lives become images of God's presence with people in need, wherever we take a stand for those who become victims of a world left to itself and to the rules of profit and ego. Have a good and blessed pregnancy! AMEN