

From unexpected places

It's so familiar to most of us, the Christmas story that we re-tell year after year. And here we are telling it again and later in this service we'll be reminded of that inn, and the inn-keeper – or in this case, as we'll see, innkeepers – and the fact that there was no room for that couple with the young woman who was on the point of giving birth. And there's the star and the wise men and they'll be putting in an appearance too. The danger of course is that the very familiarity of it all takes away from it the sheer wonder and the strangeness of what was happening in these extraordinary events. The danger is that we become immune to the shock and the surprise and the incongruity of it all. And one particular thread that runs through the story and that contributes to its oddness is the way in which new life and goodness and blessing are formed in the most unlikely and unpromising places.

For example, in the story so far we have already been introduced to a woman named Elizabeth who is pregnant and who will give birth to a very important character called John the Baptist who we looked at last week. The odd thing about Elizabeth was that she was so old – far too old to have a baby. She'd been drawing her pension for years. Yet in this elderly woman's body there is formed the prophet John, who will bear God's Word, preaching that God's Kingdom in all its power. In this unexpected place – an old woman's unfruitful womb - new life is coming to birth. And now it's Mary's turn. In her case it is not her age that makes her an unlikely mother but the fact that she is not yet married - indeed a virgin, we're told. Can such a thing possibly happen? Once again, new life forms in an impossible place – impossible for a quite different reason.

But note too Mary's location. We're told that in the sixth month an angel was sent to a town called Nazareth, and what do we know about Nazareth? Not a lot, except that later on in the Gospel story when someone hears that Jesus comes from Nazareth, the immediate reaction is, 'can anything good come out of Nazareth?' Clearly this was a place with a bad reputation, a place scorned. Indeed some have suggested that Nazareth may well have been a scarred place, a place brutally treated by the Roman occupiers when there was an uprising against them in a nearby town. In which case we have Nazareth, a

scorned place, a scarred place - and yet here Jesus is nurtured. Here he grows and is taught and learns about God. Here something good emerges.

Can anything good come out of Nazareth? Can anything good come out of an old woman's body? Can anything good come out of a virgin's womb? Well, as the angel says to Mary, nothing will be impossible with God. And it is the same God that delights to bring to birth new life and possibility out of barren, impossible, dead-end places. After all, this story that begins here will come to a climax with new life emerging out of a tomb, the most hopeless and fruitless of all places on earth. From that tomb newness bursts forth. New life, new possibility, new horizons forming in unexpected places: this is the wonder and glory of our God.

So also today. In refugee camps full of desperate people fleeing horror and terror, dignity and love and compassion will be found, holding firm. In dead-end situations where nothing new seems possible hope will be awakened. In places where human life is fragile and threatened and at risk people will be found caring for one another, sharing with one another, supporting one another. And there will be stories of heroism and love and self-sacrifice. There always are. And maybe in our own lives too – in those empty places, those scarred places, those dry and desert places new life forms and grows and comes forth.

The Christmas story is one of hope taking root in unlikely places. It's a story of surprise, of newness coming where it is least expected. It's the story of our God and of Emmanuel, God with us. Amen.

O holy and gracious God,
 eternal creator become creature,
 eternal word become flesh,
 eternal Spirit birthing all creation,
 we praise and bless your holy name.
 We worship you who
 said 'yes' to creating all things in heaven and on earth,
 and we worship you who in Jesus Christ
 has said 'yes' to coming into the world you love,
 laying aside your glory;

and we praise you for Mary, the mother of God,
who said 'yes' to becoming the mother of Jesus
and giving birth to our Lord and Saviour,
despite the risk and the shame.

We praise you for your – and for Mary's – faithfulness.

O God forgive us for times when we say 'yes'
to things we should say 'no' to...

and 'no' to things we should say 'yes' to.

Forgive us for when we compromise
and take the easy way out, resisting your call
because of its demands.

Forgive us we pray and make us like Mary
who did what was not easy but who submitted to your will.

Assure us we pray for your forgiveness and grace

And give us Mary's willingness to obey and to serve.

We pray in the name of Jesus Christ, born of Mary
and our Lord and Saviour. Amen.

Holy God,

God of surprises,

God with whom nothing is impossible,

come to your world today and bring new life;

raise up hope where we despair,

and open up dead-ends with new possibilities.

As we think of Mary of Nazareth,

we pray for that land known as the holy land,

the land of Nazareth, and Jerusalem, of Galilee and Judea,

the land of Jesus, a land of suffering and oppression then

and the same now.

O God we pray for the peace of Jerusalem and its territories.

And we pray for Syria and Iraq and Libya,

and the terrible destruction visited upon those countries,

and we pray for Sudan and Somalia and other war-torn countries,
weary with conflict.

O God of Mary and of Elizabeth, nurture new life and hope in such places.

O God in this season of Advent surprise us with your grace.

And hear us as in moments of silence we bring to you our own needs

And the needs of others for whom we care...

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.