Psalm 89:19-26 **"Amazing Grace"** Dec. 18, 2011
Luke 1:26-38

Mary's story is amazing. It has inspired debate from the very beginning.
Can't you hear Mary's neighbors saying: "Reeaallly. Have you heard what she said?
Could it be true? Did this really happen?
Even today many people wonder about the reality of the Mary's pregnancy.
Perhaps you have heard the story of a gathering of seminary professors, religious leaders, theologians, etc. who came together to discuss difficult Bible passages. There was great debate. At last the group dispersed and as the moderator was leaving the building he stopped to speak to a young man at the back of the room who had come in to sweep and get the space ready for the next day.

On a whim he asked him, what do you think? Do you believe the story of the angel Gabriel, of the news he brings to Mary, of her impregnation by the Holy Spirit?

And the young man responded:
I don't know if it happened; but I believe it is true; it's too beautiful not to be.

In a post-modern world, what is true may be distinct from what is factual.
We know that sometimes the facts don't tell the whole story.
There are stories that speak to us, and whether or not they are factual, they touch us.
They have the power to instill hope and courage and a desire to live up to them.

Such is Mary's story.
This is the story of a young woman, perhaps even a girl, confronted with life and death issues much bigger than most of us have ever had to deal with.
It is a story of courage and faithfulness. How did she do it?

How did she remain calm? How did she keep from freaking out?
How you say yes to what you never asked for and maybe don't want.
How do you handle it when life or God just walks up and says: here.

This last week, for example, several people experienced crisis in their lives that were unlooked for, unwanted. Were these holy moments?
Probably not in the sense that angels visited and said God has a plan for you.
And yet, each situation is pregnant with possibilities; each hospitalization, each gut-wrenching family situation holds within it the possibility for holiness, for goodness, for new life to come forth from it.

There were events like the family that was really looking forward to a normal Christmas this year that ends up in the hospital. There was the person who really thought that this job interview was perfect and the job just right, only to be told for about the 40th time, we're going with someone else. There is more than one fragile elder who fell—again. I could go on and on. And each scenario I've described here has been replicated at least 2 times in this congregation in the last week. It's been a rough for many folks around here!

What I am trying to say is that shocking news comes to all of us and it never looks holy. There don't seem to be any angels around—oh wait, maybe a couple.

Mary was blessed to be told that she had found favor in God's sight.
But what the angel then said to her was pretty upsetting. How can this be??
Yet, in the face of social ostracism and an uncertain future, she responded:

"Let it be unto me according to your word."

And the world has never been the same again.

It's when we can get to that 'yes', the yes in the face of shocking news,
the 'ok' of acceptance in the time of crisis, that real faith begins.

Into this reality comes the One who says: I can do all things.
My deepest, most fervent prayer is that today you hear in the depth of your heart that you have found favor in the sight of God; that something new and alive, hopeful and redeeming will come out of all the tension and worry and crises that you are experiencing personally and in the world.

You may not have had a visitation from the angel Gabriel----or you may not have recognized it. You may never have had the chance to say:
"Let it be unto me according to your word", before crisis descended upon you.
But, if God could bring forth new life from a barren old woman, like Elizabeth,
all that you think is dead can bear fruit too.
If God can transform scandal into hope, God can do it again in your life.

To my mind this is the message of Christmas; this is the hope of Christ's birth: that into the messiness of our everyday lives, new life is born.
And that borning begins when we are able to say "Yes"! Yes Lord, they will be done; Yes, Lord, lead me, guide me, help me to see your way. Yes...even though you don't know how it could possibly work. Yes, even though you really don't like the way things are shaping up. Yes, even though you're scared.

By your yes, you open yourself to God's healing, life-changing work.
But more than that---by your yes, by your openness, you too, like Mary, become the vehicle, the cradle, the fertile place where God's love can grow.
You are a carrier of new life, too.

God knows the world needs hope right now. You carry hope to a lost and confused world that thinks happiness is something you buy.
Teach the world about authentic living.
Share your story--yes, your doubts--as well as your faith.
If you live each day in faith and trust that God is creating something good and new and whole from it all, then what is growing in you can be born. But if you live in fear and dread, afraid to share, keeping it all inside, then something dies inside.

Most of us aren't visited by angels. Most of us haven't the faith of Mary.
But God still comes and new life is born in difficult situations,
carried by unlikely people announcing the good news.
Be full of love and hope and the joy of Christmas
that you might share it with the whole world.
That the whole world might know that Christ has come and new life is theirs.