

The Third Sunday of Advent
Sermon for December 16, 2007

Rose Sunday
Raymond Raney

Isaiah 35:1-10
Canticle 15
James 5:7-10
Matthew 11:2-11

This is the third Sunday of Advent, a Sunday of Joy. It is Rose Sunday. Rose because this is the Sunday during Advent when we pause to remember one of the key players in the drama that reaches it's climax about a week and a half from now – Mary.

Protestants for the most part prefer to shuffle Mary off in the corner and forget her role in the divine drama of bringing salvation to the world. I think that's a shame because it robs us of a truly human face on events that unfold during her pregnancy and after her delivery of Jesus into the world. That's why I like Rose Sunday and why we said the Magnificat together instead of the Psalm today.

And that's why I enjoy looking at our back wall with the tapestry of Mary, the Queen of Heaven and our icon of Mary, the Protection of the Mother of God. There is joy there. There is strength there.

“My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord, my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on his lowly servant. From this day all generations will call me blessed: the Almighty has done great things for me, and holy is his Name.”

A marvelous statement of the joy Mary shares with us. But I doubt that it was joy that Mary was experiencing. Think about what Mary must have been feeling at that moment eight and a half months ago when the Angel Gabriel asked her if she would bear the son of God. She was given at least a little insight into what was to befall her son, “a sword will pierce your heart.” How much did she know? How much did she realize? How much of the coming pain was part of her decision to say “yes” to God?

You must remember that Mary was not a woman. Think of Rachel and Lindley. They are the bookends for Mary's age when she was confronted by the Angel and asked to choose. Rachel is twelve and Lindley is fifteen. That's the range of age that most scholars believe Mary was when she bore Jesus. Imagine a girl that young being given that choice.

Last night I watched Rachel and Lindley as they read in the service for the Greening of the Church. They looked so grown up and mature as they read to us. And then afterward I watched as they played with the boys, using their rolled up programs as swords and

clubs, swatting at each other with abandon. At once they were women and then they were children. Such a contrast.

And that must have been what Mary was like: at once a woman, capable of bearing children, and being given the choice by an Angel; and at the same time, a child who might have preferred to play in the yard with the other children. Such a choice? In the Christian tradition of the West, Mary chooses to say “yes” immediately as if her choice was almost off hand. “Of course, I will bear the son of God.” That depiction lessens the humanity of Mary a little. In the tradition of Eastern Christianity, Mary refuses the Angel’s request six times because of the pain she knows is coming. She fully realizes that this would be more than she could possibly bear. It is only on the seventh time that Mary relents and accepts God’s request that she bear the son.

It is the Eastern tradition that I find compelling because I realize that Mary suffers as much as her son in the years ahead. I had a number of problems with Mel Gibson’s movie “The Passion of the Christ,” but I think his depiction of Mary was poignant. What affected me most was the images of Mary watching Jesus carry his cross. And when he fell, we see Mary remembering when he fell as a boy and his crying in her arms, as she kissed him and told him it would be alright. And there she is, watching her son, and being totally helpless to save or to help him.

Would she have chosen to bear Jesus if she had known? Perhaps she did, at least in part. Mary’s plight at being asked to bear the burden is what we are all faced with when asked to God’s work in this world. It’s always easier to say “no.” We never know what lies before us.

But Mary chose to be the mother of the Christ, just as we must choose to follow her son in the here and now.

“My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord, my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on his lowly servant. From this day all generations will call me blessed: the Almighty has done great things for me, and holy is his Name.”

Mary chose to answer God’s request with joy and acceptance. Let us pray that we too may find the strength to follow God’s will in our lives as she did.

Amen.