

**Advent is full of people doing the unusual...**  
**Sermon to Luke 1 & 2**

The gospel readings we have heard, the song we have just sung – even the all-age story earlier on in this service... they are all full of people doing the absolutely unusual.

It is unusual for kings to visit poor folk's babies in a stable.

It is unusual for kings to bring presents, kneel down to & worship some unknown, homeless couple's child.

And it is unusual for them to show solidarity with this tiny new born human being rather than with their colleague king – Herod.

That is what the evangelist Matthew reports us.

If we turn to Luke, we find these stories of the two women, the angel... and Zechariah, the man who lost his voice after again the angel had announced the birth of a son to him.

It is unusual for a man, who is used to speaking in public – Zechariah was a priest – to become speechless; not just because of a sore throat and just for a day or two, but for as long as the pregnancy with this child lasts.

It is unusual for an old couple who are far beyond youth & fertility to conceive a child and experience the birth of a baby of their own.

It is absolutely unusual if not disgraceful, for an old woman past the menopause to expect a baby.

And if we look at Mary...

It is unusual to be guided by the words of an angel rather than by common sense. It is unusual to ignore the values of society and give up plans of oneself in order to bring forth something God wants you to do.

It is unusual to say "yes" to a baby, when you are not yet married to a man.

It is unusual to hope that the man you love, will accept a pregnancy of yours, when he had nothing to do with it.

It is unusual to put your own life and well being at risk and agree to a plan an angel has introduced to you, rather than sticking to what you were always hoping to do.

It is unusual to confront family and friends with something as disgraceful as an unwed mother and child...

...and it is of course unusual that a teenage girl sets off for a long journey of her own, and at the end of it sings a song of revolution to the world...

Sisters and brothers, can you see, what I mean?

Advent is full of people doing the unexpected and unusual.

...full of human beings, very ordinary people like you and me, preparing for and helping God to be born in this world.

Mary, who the lectionary for 4<sup>th</sup> Advent wants us to look at, is just as ordinary as all the others – and besides that: she is the youngest of them all.

To many of us her real humanity is hidden by huge distances of history and geography, of culture and religion, by interpretation and speculation.

What we have are glimpses of her, flashes of a flesh-and-blood young woman who lived through extraordinary events.

Looking at her closely in the Women's Bible Study sessions on these Tuesday mornings in Advent I see much more clearly...

I see that Mary was a woman who even at a fairly young age was the subject & not the object of her own life, one who had the courage & the confidence and the inner conviction to make her own choices freely, and to assume responsibility for the consequences. She did not say, "I will have to ask my father and mother, or my fiancé", as a well-brought-up Jewish girl should. She said "I", in the knowledge that she was setting in motion a train of events that might mean shame, rejection, isolation and possibly even stoning, - as well as hurt to those she loved.

I see that she was a woman who thought deeply, and had the capacity to reflect on the activity of God in the life of her people and in her own life. Without ever going near a school – Jewish girls didn't do that in Mary's time – she was a theologian and a politician.

Looking at Mary I see that she was a woman who sometimes got it wrong, who had to learn from her children, who needed the support of other people. Nothing at all wrong with that.

I see that Mary decided to visit Elizabeth – either because they had been close friends for a long time, or simply because Mary had no one else to turn to. She was in the situation when the presence of a close friend helped her to grow strong and courageous and perform a task, she might not have thought herself capable of.

I see that she was a woman who recognised her own fears & doubts, but who chose to act out of a trust in God which led her on to strange and difficult roads – into exile, on to the way of the cross, and eventually into the first Christian fellowship.

I see that Mary – when the angel visited her – was offered a blessing that caused more problems than it solved. "How can this be?" was surely a sentence Mary did not only speak one but many times. "How can this be?" must have dominated her thinking and reflecting of those days and weeks.

To be pregnant is one thing. But to be pregnant with the Christ is something altogether different.

I see that she was a woman to whom it was given to challenge values of family, culture and religion – scandalously pregnant with a nameless child, married to a husband who was not the father of her child, mother to a man who was not so much her son as he was the son of God. She was the cornerstone of the new community whose belonging comes from love and not biology.

When Mary arrived at Elizabeth's I see that right from the first moment of their meeting Mary was affirmed. With the solidarity of the friend Mary's doubts disappeared. She did not only believe that the promise made by God would be fulfilled, and that she would be able to face the challenge..., no she was also liberated to sing a most radical song about changes that will make all the

difference. There she was, talking about the restructuring of the social order and of religious and economic structures.

Mary sang about more than shaking the rugs and dusting off the furniture. She sang about a thorough cleaning that shook the very foundation of all that was familiar and comfortable.

I see that Mary sang about a new creation, about a new way of committing ourselves to the world and to each other. And I can see that her “yes” has been the pattern for so many men and women ever since.

What we see in Mary, what we discover about her in the texts can of course only be achieved by interpretation and a good deal of imagination... and by our own experience and understanding of life.

One thing we can be absolutely sure about is that she was a woman who above all else participated in birth, in many kinds of birth, in the birth of the new, in the birth of the unusual, the unexpected, and in the birth of the divine.

We see that Mary was a pregnant woman, called by God to bring forth the Christ-child... to give birth to the holy. This she did as a homeless stranger in the unfamiliar place. The inn was shut against the cold. All the guests were warm inside. They might not have heard or seen the moment of mystery that took place in the stable.

Giving birth means labour and pain... blood and sweat: on the one hand an utterly bodily experience; and it means ideas, prayers, dreams and visions, spirituality on the other.

Giving birth can mean much more than delivering a baby.

Giving birth can mean we bear our gifts and talents, we bear our selves, we bring forth who we are and what we have.

To me giving birth to new life in this time of Advent means: making life truly human for all people, to make to world just and peaceful for all, men, women and children of whatever race or nationality, colour of skin or social status. To me giving birth to new life means: transforming the face of the earth, to be a mother of God and making it possible for God to be born in this world.

We can see that Mary was a woman who said “yes” to the greatest challenge of a lifetime. And nine months later on that night in Bethlehem God came to life! That is what generation after generation of Christians prepare for in Advent, what they celebrate at Christmas, and what is at the heart of their faith.

God being born in Bethlehem - the wrinkly little being rests confidently in the animal warmth and the lantern light. This God needs to be cared for, because he is born into the shadows of human life... he is homeless... on the road, and his parents were anxious, worried, poor – refugees without a place to stay.

God in this child is in danger.

His life is at risk.

He needs a place to stay.

And he finds a place to stay – because yet another person among the Advent & Christmas figures of our stories does the unusual: the innkeeper opens his stable to a young mother due to give birth.

God could come to this world because ordinary people risked doing the extraordinary.

People did the unusual.

God can come to this world here and today, every day, when ordinary people of our time, of all times risk doing the extra-ordinary.

Sisters and brothers, when I look around in this church this morning, I can see so many of us doing and living the unusual.

I can see the unwed Nigerian mum bringing her baby daughter for baptism.

I can see the African choir singing hot rhythms in the cold of the German winter.

I can see the Brit who learns Russian, the American who stays on in spite of his plans to return home.

I can see the Jamaican who left New York to follow her love to Germany, I can see the Kenyan coming to terms with a foreign school system, I can see the pastor struggling at times because she decided to work in the language of her heart rather than in her mother-tongue.

I can see the people who've come for 2 to 5 years and then buy a house and stay.

I can see those who say "yes" to the challenge of raising their children between the worlds of their home country and the land they are living in.

I can see the family opening their home to a complete stranger because otherwise she'd have nowhere to go with her new born child.

I can see women rushing off to hospital in the midst of all the demands of this season to share some love and warmth with those who are only a number to the official system of this rich country.

I can see the women together with the men in leadership...

I can see men carrying babies around, washing dishes, sweeping the floor in the fellowship area...

I can see mutual efforts of understanding and mutual support, and I understand that this is the small beginning of changing this world into a better place!

Advent is full of people doing the unusual.

We are innumerable ordinary people doing the extraordinary.

We are truly Advent people...

standing in a long line with Elizabeth and Zechariah, with Mary and Joseph, with the kings and all the others.

We are fit to meet God.

We are called to make a space for him, and help him to be born.

God is waiting for us.

God is longing for us.

God needs us.

Amen.

### **Prayer**

Loving God,  
as for Mary, there is no easy way to doing the unusual.  
There is no easy way to new life.  
The risks are there, the pain is real, the labour long.  
You call us to simply say “yes”  
to the challenge, to the pain, to the joy.  
Let us hear your invitation to the miracle of your birth,  
and help us to say our “yes”.  
Now and forever.  
Amen.