

Maternity Leave

Isaiah 7:10 Again the LORD spoke to Ahaz, saying,

11 Ask a sign of the LORD your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven.

12 But Ahaz said, I will not ask, and I will not put the LORD to the test.

13 Then Isaiah said: "Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary mortals, that you weary my God also?"

14 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.

Luke 1:26 In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth,

27 to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary.

28 And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you."

29 But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be.

30 The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God.

31 And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus.

32 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.

33 He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."

34 Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?"

35 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.

36 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.

37 For nothing will be impossible with God."

38 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.

Loving Creator shine as a light before me that you may be seen and not I. Give me words that I may speak give us ears that we may hear and through your Holy Spirit help us understand.

Amen.

In kindergarten there was a rug where we had our morning circle. Each day we looked at the calendar. As the year went on we learned about the days of the week and the months and the whole year.

Calendars are common in cultures around the world.

The ancients were able to know the seasons and how things worked.

Stonehenge and other ancient sites show that people cared deeply about the changing of the seasons.

The calendar helped people plan the work of the year. In Egypt the year began with the rising of the star Sirius which came just before the flooding of the Nile in the spring.

The Jewish calendar begins with Rosh Hashanah usually in September.

In some places in the world there are only two seasons wet and hot.

In New Hampshire we had five seasons, we had summer, peeper- no not the frogs, the leaf peepers who came to see foliage, winter, mud and black fly.

I have been into calendars for a different reason lately. We are now seven weeks from the due date of our second grandchild. Lindseigh is due May 26th. I keep telling her that My birthday, June 4th, is only nine days later and wouldn't it be nice if I had a grandchild born on my birthday!

Only five months ago, when I mentioned this, she was actually amenable to the idea. It is only fair, Walker was born on Jodi's birthday, I don't think I'm asking for anything unreasonable.

Lately, as we approach the reality of the situation, she has been less and less enthusiastic about the idea, and has even been less than amused by the idea. I actually hope the baby does not wait or I'll be in deep trouble.

Watching the calendar and waiting for a baby. That is where we are today.

Some of you may think I'm off my cookie once again as I start to talk about the baby Jesus. Last week it was Scrooge and this week the nativity story. We just had Easter and I'm already pushing Christmas again. There is actually a reason.

So I want to say a little about the reason first. The reason for the readings we have today is the liturgical calendar. It is the Christian calendar.

The development of this calendar began during the early years of the church and continued into the Middle Ages. The year was broken up to tell the story of salvation as revealed in Jesus Christ.

We begin the year in Advent waiting. Then Jesus is born; Magi come; he is baptized and begins his ministry. Then the journey of Lent, Easter, ascension, and eventually Pentecost. With the gift of the Holy Spirit we then continue the story until the end of the year when Jesus is king on the last Sunday of the liturgical year in November.

Superimposing the life and work of Jesus onto the calendar year allowed the church to remember the life of Jesus each year.

That is the liturgical calendar, that is why we talk about the pregnant Mary today. This week, on March 25th, we passed the feast of the Annunciation.

This rarely happens that Easter is before the Annunciation. This date is the same every year. March 25th is nine months till Christmas. Nine months till baby Jesus' due date, get it.

Normally we would hear about doubting Thomas today, but with the season so early, I wanted to take the opportunity to do something a bit different this morning. It seems strange to speak of Mary and her preparations for the birth of Christ when we have just gone through Holy Week and Easter, but it may be a little break, a little maternity leave, as it were.

The angel Gabriel was sent to Nazareth, to Mary. The angel had an announcement for the young woman. She would become pregnant and have a son and call him Jesus.

Mary, to her credit, says yes, let it be as you say.

So Mary begins her long nine month journey to the manger. She begins her waiting, her maternity leave.

Pregnancy is a long wait. Nine months of waiting.

And the wait seems to get longer as the time approaches.

We are now seven weeks from our new grandchild and Lindseigh's voice has a certain fatigue in it, perhaps because my grandchild is using her lungs as a pillow.

We may not like the wait, but it does help us get ready. It gives us time to look at all the things we could get to welcome a new little one.

We can prepare and allow the reality to sink in.

I think that is the reason for celebrating the announcement to Mary by the angel, the announcement that she would bear God's son. We celebrate it because we need some time to get ready.

Did you know there are only 270 shopping days left till Christmas?
We need some time to get ready.

We better hope that the retailers don't latch on to this idea or we will have Christmas stuff in the stores starting after Easter.

We will get ready- eventually- with decorations and all the stuff to remember the babe in the manger. This seems to stand in stark contrast to what we have been doing the past few weeks. We have just remembered Jesus' passion and resurrection. With the empty tomb, Easter has proclaimed Jesus the victor. These images of Easter loom large. This story as I said is not just any story, but is the story of God's love.

On one side we have the humble manger, on the other we have an empty tomb.

These images seem so far apart, but they are two parts of one story.

An angel announces the birth, and an angel announces the resurrection.

They are like bookends of the story. Symmetry makes for good stories and this is a good example of symmetry at its best. The angels and their messages frame the story.

The message at the other side is the one we heard last week

the angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples, 'He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.' This is my message for you."

We know the message of the angel Gabriel from the Christmas story.

Gabriel says to Mary, "Be not afraid."

This is the beginning of the story, or at least a beginning.

What makes the symmetry really work is the very beginning of each greeting.

Gabriel says to Mary, "Be not afraid." And the angel at the tomb said to the women, "Be not afraid."

At Jesus arrival we hear be not afraid, at the tomb, be not afraid.

I'd love to translate some this into modern language, Chill out dude!

The events that were unfolding were bound to be frightening in each of these stories. On the surface they looked puzzling and potentially dangerous. These were events that would be expected to cause tension, anxiety and fear, yet they are told be not afraid.

This is actually a theme throughout the longer story: Do not be afraid, God says this to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob, God says it to Moses and Joshua. God says it to the prophets Elijah and Zechariah and Ezekiel.

The shepherds had the same greeting while they were in the fields keeping watch over their flocks by night.

Be not afraid.

Jesus actually said this often:

When he met James and John and Peter, he said to them do not be afraid, from now on you will be fishing for men.

When discussing our life as humans he said: So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows.

When he came walking on the water he said, "Do not be afraid, it is I."

On the mountain at the transfiguration, Peter, James and John were overcome, and Jesus says, "Get up, and do not be afraid."

I don't know about you, but if I came face to face with most of these things I am going to feel some fear. These are big things. And, as I look around at the world and my life, it would be easy to find places of fear on which to dwell.

We have plenty of reasons to have fear: war, poverty, violence, disease, those are pretty good ones. How about earthquakes, and volcanoes- we seem pretty safe from these so far here in Monson, but with CNN we see it right here. Then we have tsunamis and wildfires and mudslides and avalanches and blizzards and hurricanes.

Lately the TV shows and movies have tried to out do themselves with disaster scenarios. A Weather Channel show highlights the possible disasters, and then we get shows on comets and asteroids, mega volcanoes, like we don't have enough to worry about with global warming and environmental damage and over fishing.

And now that I have gotten you all scared I must say: do not be afraid!

It is not that we should not be aware and concerned. We should stay connected, and know what is happening, but living in fear is not part of God's plan.

The world sees things one way and God sees another.

Abraham could have feared, but he trusted God, as a result, God could also tell his children Isaac and Jacob not to fear.

Moses and Joshua should have looked at the odds and given up from fear, but God led them through wilderness and danger into a promised land.

Elijah was confronted with danger and challenges from all around and yet he continued to speak the word God gave him. The prophets like Ezekiel and Jeremiah also went on in spite of tremendous opposition.

The disciples followed an itinerant preacher and left their nets and lives behind.

Be not afraid, not because the world is easy,
Be not afraid, not because there is no danger.
Be not afraid, not because you can save yourself.
Be not afraid because Jesus has won the victory.
Be not afraid because God is with us and we can abide with God forever.

This is where the whole story fits together and becomes one. Emmanuel, God among us, came to teach and that arrival was a humble birth in a stable.

Jesus came to bring God's Word close to us, and the evil that resides in the world secured the Word of God to an instrument of torture. This image was a good reason to be afraid.

The angel said "be not afraid" because the fear of the cross might blind us to the reality of the empty tomb.

The world wants us to see the cross but not the empty tomb, because fear has a strong hold on us.

But the empty tomb is where we find the messenger saying, "He lives, your savior lives!"

Jesus taught and sent his followers to continue his work, and, to do that, we must remember the victory, but we need to see the whole story to see just how amazing it is.

Sometimes we need to take a little break, and the calendar gave us an opportunity for a little maternity leave: we can await the baby Jesus, the beginning of a story that knows no end.

Waiting for babies gives us a chance to think about the bigger story. As we wait for Lindsey to birth a new grandchild, we are reflecting on the time when we were young parents, and then I start wondering about when our grandchildren start having children.

We can stop, remember, wonder and imagine.

Early Christians set up the liturgical calendar to give a framework for remembering the life, ministry and saving work of Jesus. In this way we become a part of the story.

Easter brings the victory that we share with Jesus, the victory of the empty tomb, the victory of eternal life.

We are part of that story here in Monson; we now bear this story and share it with others. We become part of a story that transforms us as we hear it and tell it.

The Word of God became God among us. The Babe in the manger became the teacher. The murdered man becomes the risen Christ.

This is God's story.

This is our story too.

Thanks be to God.
AMEN.