

God sent the angel Gabriel to the Galilean village of Nazareth to a virgin engaged to be married to a man descended from David. His name was Joseph, and the virgin's name, Mary. Upon entering, Gabriel greeted her: "Good morning! You're beautiful with God's beauty, Beautiful inside and out! God be with you." Mary was thoroughly shaken, wondering what was behind a greeting like that. But the angel assured her, "Mary, you have nothing to fear. God has a surprise for you: You will become pregnant and give birth to a son and call His name Jesus. He will be great, be called 'Son of the Highest.' The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David; He will rule Jacob's house forever - no end, ever, to his kingdom." Mary said to the angel, "But how? I've never slept with a man." The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, the power of the Highest hover over you; Therefore, the child you bring to birth will be called Holy, Son of God." And Mary said, "Let it be with me... just as you say."

Luke 1:26-35

Last week at the California Nevada Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church, Bishop Brown appointed me to serve here, for my fifth year as your pastor. I'm starting our new year together with a sermon series called "Dream Big." Last week I was co-director of a United Methodist Family Camp, and "Dream Big" was our theme.... and it spoke to me of starting a new year. We'll have a memory verse during July and one of my dreams is that we'll say it often enough that by the end of the month we know it "by heart." It's in the bulletin on page 3, and it's hung here, above the altar. Let's say it together: "Jeremiah 29:11: For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans to prosper you and not harm you; plans to give you hope and a future."

All this month we'll hear stories of people in scripture who dreamed big, who dreamed God's dreams. Mary, the mother of Jesus, is one of those dreamers. The bible tells us that Mary pondered things in her heart, which is a way to tend dreams, like a womb tends a baby and a gardener tends seeds. Mary's fiancé Joseph was visited by an angel in a dream... and scripture says that an angel also appeared to Mary. On Father's Day we heard about Joseph, who was part of God's dream to become one of us. Mary was also part of this dream of God. The ancients were receptive to dreams as God's messages; dreams were looked at and considered seriously. We are also a part of God's dream to build God's kingdom "on earth as it is in heaven."

The Orthodox Church calls Mary “Theotokos” which means “God-bearer.” Mary carried God within her; she carried God’s dream of intimately sharing this life with us; and she carried in her heart all that was told to her about her Child. I love this image: that we too can be “Theotokos” carrying God’s dreams within us. It’s as scandalous an idea that we are carriers of God’s dreams as God choosing a poor peasant girl to carry the Christ-Child. We are all of us (if we chose to be) bearers of God’s dreams.

Mary’s cousin Elizabeth, and her unborn child, John, were the first to recognize that Mary was “Theotokos.” When John heard Mary’s voice he leapt for joy in Elizabeth’s womb, and Elizabeth spontaneously praised God that the mother of the Lord had come to her. Later shepherds would tell Mary that angels filled the night sky, singing and glorifying God over the birth of her baby. When Mary and Joseph took their baby to the temple to fulfill the purification rite, an old man named Simeon took Jesus in his arms and said, “At last, Lord, You can dismiss your servant in peace, as You promised! For with my own eyes I have seen Your salvation which You have made ready for every people.” Mary continued to be amazed by all that was said about her Son... to ponder things, to hold within her heart God’s dreams. Simeon told Mary: “This Child is destined to make many fall and many rise in Israel... for He will expose the secret thoughts of many hearts. And for you ... your very soul will be pierced by a sword.”

Don’t you wonder how could such a young a woman - a girl, really - could bear such heavy prophecies, could carry this unexpected and unasked for Child, and could hold and ponder God’s dreams in her heart? Mary was able to be a God-bearer because she was a listener and a contemplative. Mary could hold and ponder God’s dreams because she was aware that she was a vessel of God, and not God herself. To contemplate is to look at something lightly and thoughtfully.... to gaze at. Scripture tells us that Mary pondered things... the angel visit, God’s dream, the prophecies, and the events that unfolded in her Child’s life... Mary pondered all of it in her heart. She gave God’s dreams fertile soil in her heart to sprout, to take root, to flourish and bear fruit. Mary was able to listen, to ponder, to wonder, and to gaze at God’s dreams.

There is a wonderful, big tree in the backyard of the parsonage. I hope you'll come over on Wednesday evenings in July for "Backyard Worship" and you can sit beneath it. This tree speaks to me of God's dreams for us. There are increasing schisms in the world, in our country, and in the church. Ideas and beliefs divide and alienate us from each other and we begin to see how wars start, as people take sides, and see themselves as right and good, and those who think otherwise as wrong and evil. This redwood tree in the parsonage backyard has deep roots and wide branches. It speaks to me of God's dream that we too grow deep roots and wide branches as we prayerfully work to build God's kingdom here on earth... as it is in heaven.

The Israelites understood salvation (wholeness, completeness, oneness with God) to be for the whole nation of Israel, and not simply for the individual. The Black Church sings a song that reflects this theology that God created us to be one with God, and one with each other: *"I need you, you need me. We're all a part of God's body. Stand with me. Agree with me: we're all a part of God's body. It is His will that every need be supplied. You are important to me; I need you to survive. I pray for you, you pray for me. I love you, I need you to survive. I won't harm you with words from my mouth. I love you, I need you to survive."* Salvation is God's dream for all humanity... with no one left out, no one left behind. We are all important; we are all part of God's body.

It was God's dream to become one of us... to live our life, to be in solidarity with us, to help us see every person (look at how Jesus did this! No one was unlovable or undesirable to Jesus... this is our sin, our brokenness that permits us to see others as unlovable and undesirable.) Jesus looked at every person as a unique, beloved, and irreplaceable child of God. In Jesus God came to be one of us... and God is still with us. So in the nightmare, or in the heartbreak, or at the graveside, or wherever it is that we are powerless and hopeless, we need to remember God's big dream was and is to be here, to be with us. Whatever we face, God is with us.

God needed a young woman (maybe someone who didn't over-think things too much?) to birth God's dream. We exalt Mary (we don't worship her, but we praise her and lift her

up) because of her courage and her willingness to ponder and carry and birth God's dream... to give herself over to God's dream. Many of us think we're not called by God to dream big... to bear and to birth God's dreams. But we are... and in this time in the world God needs every one of us to listen to God's messengers (remember that the word angel means "messenger" so God's messengers can be anyone... come from anywhere.)

My dream for us is that we are like the redwood tree in the backyard of the parsonage: that we grow deeper roots and wider branches. The deeper roots testify to our love for God. You might already have deep love for God. But you might want still-deeper roots... and this doesn't happen with good intentions. It happens by reading the bible.... reading the bible not to prove your theology but to discover the love of God. In this new year, read every scripture that has to do with love. Skip Leviticus and Numbers and read about love. That you love, and are loved, is God's dream for you, so read about love. Then listen to God's love for you: when we sing, in the silence of the night sky, in the ways you care for and comfort others, in the touch of someone's hand, when nature overwhelms you with God's beauty... in all of these ways listen for God's love for you.

And then be thankful. Be amazed. Say "Wow" as many times a day as you can over how blessed you are. Talk about your love for God. Start small. Call me and say, "Marylee, I really love God." And I'll say, "Wow." Then tell your children or your grandchildren or your best friend, "You know, my pastor has challenged me to love God more deeply and I'm doing it. I'm really loving God." And then as part of talking about God, be part of a small group that's focused on loving God. Our Wesleyan roots are in small groups. Jesus met with a small group of 12. In a small group you can be encouraged to love God more deeply. You can learn new ways and share your own experiences about loving God. The other ways I mentioned of loving God are personal ways. In a small group we are stretched and the rough edges of our understanding can be smoothed. We learn how to talk about God... and the fear and embarrassment of talking about God's love give way to deeper ways to experience and express it.

What if Mary, the woman chosen by God to bear God's Son, kept the angel-visit to herself? What if she'd given in to doubt and confusion and was too afraid to act? What if she'd thought that God's dream was too evangelical, or if she'd been afraid that God's dream would change her too much? Aren't those things we worry about if we become bearers of God's dreams? Let's be like Mary in this new year together: let's ponder God's love; let's say yes to bearing God's dreams. In this new year I challenge you to grow deeper roots of love for God. I encourage you to see that growing deeper roots of love for God will increase your love of others... perhaps all others... and that you'll become a bearer of God's dream of love. And I encourage you to experiment with a small group of others who want deeper roots of love.

The redwood tree in the backyard of the parsonage has wide branches. They reach out and touch and come in contact with branches of other trees... those in our backyard and those growing in the nearby yards and those growing wild in the creek. My dream in this new year is that we grow wider branches that witness to our compassion, and our willingness to take risks, and to suffer for others. You might already have double-wide branches... or your branches might be held against your trunk to protect what's yours, and what you love. I love Mary's willingness to risk it all (which was her life, since being pregnant and unmarried was punishable by death) to carry God's dream. And being part of God's dream exposed Mary to all kinds of people... dirty, smelly, unreliable shepherds telling wild stories of angels, heathen foreigners bearing gifts, a weird old man who held Jesus and thanked God that now he could die happy having seen God's salvation. And still Mary let God extend her world and widen her branches to include the people her Son ate with and touched and healed... lepers, and the dead, and sinners, and questionable women.

Jesus modeled for His mother, and for us... branches that extend into the world and past our human comfort zones... branches that widen to include the poor, the hungry, the immigrant, the child, the elderly, the lonely, the mentally ill, the stranger, the enemy.

My dream is that our wider branches welcome and include and bless all kinds of people. I challenge every small group in the church, in our new year together, to widen your branches and have a joint ministry. It might be a ministry of prayer. It might be giving money together to a project. It might be serving together on a mission here at home or somewhere else in the world. I wonder if Mary had prayed, before the angel visited her, "O Lord, extend my world, give me wider branches that reach into the world with love." I wonder if God, hearing Mary's prayer, realized that God had found someone to bear and birth God's dream of being with us. Let's make that our prayer... "Lord, extend my world, give me wider branches that reach into the world with love."

Together, because we're all a part of Christ's body, and because His love includes all of us, let's grow deeper roots of love for God, and extend wider branches of care and compassion for others. Jesus' mother, Mary, was one of God's dreamers... was part of God's big dream to be one of us, to be with us. I want us to dream big that God will use us, as we grow deeper roots and wider branches, to bring God's dream of heaven here on earth. The prophet Jeremiah spoke God's word to the people. "For I know the plans (and dreams) I have for you, declares the Lord." In this new year together let's learn this scripture by heart, and take God's dreams to heart, and like Mary, ponder all of it in our hearts.

Once more let's say our memory verse: "Jeremiah 29:11: For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans to prosper you and not harm you; plans to give you hope and a future." Amen.