

Good morning,

Yesterday we began the morning lighting the Memorial candle for: Consuelo and Ted Hanks; Gail Bachman's and Lynn Costellano's mother, Marguerite Yates; Sue Edwards' father and Barbara and Charlie Hughes' son's father-in-law. We held in prayer Betty House and Gerry Kelsey.

Longest Night Service (Blue Christmas)-Tuesday, Dec. 22 at 5:00PM

We are considering holding the Christmas Eve Service at 5:30 PM this year. Please send me your thoughts before I ask Carolyn to send this to the Lincoln County News!

Also, please respond to this email with your favorite Christmas hymn and we will try to get them all in in the next couple of weeks!

There will be no Advent Study this week.

The children helped to fill the Nativity and continued to add their Chrismons to our beautiful tree! **Next Sunday, Dec. 20, is the children's Christmas program. You don't want to miss it!**

Continuing to stray from the lectionary and meet the witnesses to the Incarnation, yesterday we talked about Mary.

Isaiah 9:6-7
Luke 1:26-45

If you have looked at the South Bristol Union Church facebook page, you saw a so-so photograph of a magnificent painting. The Basilica of the Annunciation in Nazareth is filled with portraits of Mary from countries around the world. Most of them are like pictures we have all seen of Mary-peaceful, loving, nurturing. No surprise, the painting from the United States has stirred some controversy! But the farther I get from it, the better I like it. It is a powerful painting, showing a woman of strength filled with the Glory of God.

MESSAGE

How can this be?

How many of you remember the day you found out you were going to have your first child? Were you filled with joy? Or did you hear the news with dread, with fear?

If you were a fourteen year old girl, unmarried, how would you have felt?

If an imposing figure appeared suddenly beside you? I know I'd have been dumbstruck with fear.

Zechariah and Joseph, the shepherds were terrified. The first thing the angel, Gabriel, said to all of them was, "Do not be afraid!" Forget the chubby cherubs of Christmas cards. In the Gospels, angels frighten the living daylights out of people.

But to this young, teenage girl, he said, "Rejoice, favored one! The Lord is with you!"

Gabriel told Mary, "You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you will name him Jesus." Mary was as shocked as Abraham and Zechariah when Gabriel told them they would be fathers.

Mary asked the question any reasonable, intelligent person would ask, "How can this be as I have never been with a man?"

"Nothing is impossible for God." Gabriel told her it would be a unique work of the Holy Spirit within her.

Mary responded, "I am the Lord's servant. Let it be with me just as you have said."

Thomas Merton calls a moment like this "le point vierge" - the point at which we can meet God in a real and experimental contact. This little point of nothingness and of absolute poverty is the pure glory of God in us."

That was the point at which the Spirit of God began to do something in Mary that by all human expectations would have been impossible. 'Le point vierge' or the virgin point was when Mary said yes and became part of God's saving work in this world.

As was true in the story of Zechariah and Elizabeth, we miss the point if we spend all our time debating the biological details of a virgin conception. Luke is teaching the theology of salvation, not a science class about human conception.

Both Luke's Gospel and the early creeds of the church were looking back on the whole of Jesus' life from this side of the Resurrection. The virgin birth is Luke's way of saying that in Jesus we see the essential character of the Almighty God squeezed into human flesh. It's the gospel way of saying that in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, we see Immanuel, God with us, womb to tomb, birth to earth, cradle to grave.

The story we tell from Christmas to Easter is the life-transforming story of the way the self-giving love that is the essence of the character of God invaded every corner of human existence. That story begins here at the virgin point in Mary's life, the point of absolute nothingness when Mary says, "I am the Lord's servant. Let it be with me just as you have

said." It's the point at which Mary allowed the love of God to become a tangible reality in and through her life.

What might the virgin point be for us? The truth is that no matter how hard we try to crank up whatever people mean by the "Christmas spirit", none of us is capable of giving birth to the life, love, joy, and peace of Christ by our own power. It is always a work of the Spirit that goes beyond our explanation but not beyond our believing. Our only hope is a new birth by the radical invasion of the Spirit of God. The only thing we can contribute to that new life is our absolute poverty of soul and the availability of a young girl named Mary who said yes.

Le point vierge is the place where conversion begins, the place where we say yes to the Spirit of God and allow the love of God in Christ to reshape and redirect our lives.

Sometimes le point vierge is a quiet, solitary place in our own souls. Sometimes we experience it in relationship with others. Sometimes it surprises us in the middle of our hectic and chaotic lives. Sometimes it happens when we are confronted with an act of compassion, grace, or peace in this world that can only be explained as a work of God's love becoming flesh among us. Wherever and whenever it happens, it is always an invitation for us, like Mary, to say yes. It's the invitation for us and our world to be born anew, born from above, born again and again and again.

Say yes to God one day at a time, each and every day.

Almighty God, who entered into the life of Mary and became flesh among us, we give you thanks for the example of her obedience to your will. By your Spirit, give birth to new life in us that, like her, we might become the bearers of your life and love to this world. Amen