

*Sermon preached by Revd Rachel McDougall*

*St Paul's Canterbury*

*Advent 4B*

*Sunday 20 Dec 2020*

This is such a beautiful story and yet can be such a difficult one.

It is easy for us to get hung up on the virgin birth and all the ways that Mary has been presented as the virgin-mother.

The word used for virgin Parthenos means young woman, young maiden.

This story stands in the long line of stories that talk about the call God makes to certain people to do something special for God.

There are very similar stories of visits by angelic messengers to people like Abraham, Hannah, Isaiah and Gideon.

There is the call to do something unlikely or even impossible – think of Sarah who was old and yet had a baby, Hannah who longed for a child and was old and barren, Samuel called by God to be a prophet when he thought it was Eli the priest calling him. Jonah was sent to the foreign city Nineveh to convince them to stop sinning and he didn't want to go.

There is a similar pattern of the call, the seemingly impossible ask and the humble response of the person saying yes to God.

The call to Mary is similar.

Here is an unexpected call to a young unmarried woman as the angel announces that the Lord is with her.

She is reassured and called to bear a child and the 'How can it be?' question.

The focus of the story isn't on the virgin birth and the early church didn't really get hung up on this. The significance was that God was acting, doing a new thing.

The main significance is God's call to her and her 'Yes' to God.

She trusts in God's call, that God is with her – 'Here am I, the servant of the Lord'.

She stands in a long line of all those who have responded to God's call with 'Here am I'.

She trusts in God and as her song reveals she rejoices in God who blesses her and what will come to be through her.

The early church names her 'Theotokos' - the God-bearer.

Mary reminds us that each of us are called by God.

Each of us have the capacity to bear God within us.

Each of us are called to trust in God's love and grace that 'nothing is impossible with God.'

In these days these words are comforting and encouraging.

We are reminded not to fear, but to trust in the God who can make all things new, that what God promises to bring to birth is possible.

Hope, peace joy and love can come to birth in and through us as we trust in the word made flesh as we say yes to God.

The call can often come in unexpected ways, when our lives are turned upside down.

One door can close and another unerxpectedly opens, and we find ourselves called to follow.

Mary gives us the courage that we too can say yes to God, we too can be God-bearers and rejoice in the promise of love and hope.

May this be true for us this Christmas.