

“Wonderfully Irrational” – Luke 1:26-38 – Advent 4 – Dec 18/05

Well, to quote the anxious retail chains and big malls, there are only a few more days to go until Christmas. It doesn't seem much like Christmas, though, for those of us who are blessed with living on the sunny and dry West Coast. Now if we were back East it would be a different story. My eldest son in PEI tells me the schools and offices were closed for a couple of days this week due to snow – that's that pretty white stuff you can see up on the mountains! For them it's already looking WAY too much like Christmas.

It must be the fine weather that's affecting people here, because I've heard quite a few people say they are nowhere near being ready for Christmas – in fact they say they haven't even started decorating! Can you imagine how difficult it must be to get into the Christmas spirit in the Southern Hemisphere, where it's high summer? Can you imagine how hard it must be to believe in Santa's sleigh while you're on the way to the beach?! I can remember the first time I heard Christmas songs being played from loudspeakers hung in the palm trees on the beach in Florida – it was a strange experience, hard to believe it was Christmas, and hard to get into the Christmas spirit.

It must be hard to get into the Christmas spirit in Sydney, Australia at this time of year, when they're heading to the beaches. That may be part of the reason that there is a new cycle of violence happening there – race wars, really – as each weekend gangs try to take revenge on the 'other side' for the beating they took last weekend. Police and civic officials are issuing warnings to people to stay away from the popular beaches in Sydney for fear of innocents getting caught in the middle of the violence. Proponents of the violence argue that they are just doing what makes sense – “we gotta stop them before they do it to us again.”

That kind of violence is the exact opposite of what we hear in our gospel reading this morning – a reading that many claim, and rightly so, makes no sense at all. After all, doesn't it read like fiction? An angel appears, “sent by God” the story goes, and speaks bewildering words to a young woman, telling her she has been selected by God to be highly favoured. More unbelievable than that, the angel goes on to say that she would become pregnant and bear a son who would become the mightiest ruler of her nation and faith – who would even be called the Son of God. Ridiculous! Unbelievable! Incredible! Totally irrational!

And that of course was the reaction of the young woman to whom these unbelievable words were spoken. “How can this be?” she asks, reasonably enough, since she is not married, only engaged, and still a virgin. So off-the-wall, so unbelievable, so irrational are the contents of the angel's message that she doesn't even get to questioning the very existence of the angel, or the angel's authority to make these outrageous claims. Perhaps we aren't privy to the whole conversation between the angel and the young woman – it might be possible that there was a whole argument that raged, with the angel trying to persuade her that neither he nor she were crazy – after all, we do hear the angel using the argument that even Elizabeth, said to be barren, was already six months pregnant to support his claim for legitimacy for the claim that Mary would also become pregnant. That's kind of believable, but then the whole incredible story wraps up with the young woman, Mary, suddenly going along with the whole scheme – “okydoke”, she says, “that's cool – bring it on!” Talk about an irrational response! What would make

more sense would be for her to argue, to protest, to take ages to finally be convinced, and eventually to reluctantly go along.

People today have a great deal of trouble believing the events recorded in this delightful account in Luke's gospel, not the least because we are children of the Age of Reason. That term 'Age of Reason' refers to the period of enormous scientific and intellectual advancements made in the 17th and 18th Centuries. Also called the Enlightenment, -- the Age of Reason -- brought about in Western Thought, the age of the scientific man. It was a time of rebellion in thought and action in science, economics, politics and even or especially in the Church. The thinkers of the age were no longer content to accept the cosmos and its contained life as a mystery to be simply accepted. Francis Bacon argued that the only knowledge of importance to man was empirically rooted in the natural world. (It is, incidentally, to Bacon we trace the expression, "Knowledge is Power.") Other great names from this age include Voltaire, Rousseau, Paine, Jefferson, and John Locke, who claimed, "all knowledge is founded on and ultimately derives itself from sense." This was the same Locke who wrote, that if the "ruling body offends against natural law; it must be deposed": this was the philosophical stuff which led to the American Revolution in 1775, and the French Revolution in 1789.

This was the era that led to the widespread belief that only rationality made sense, that proclaimed that only logical thought that followed scientific process was valid, that the mysteries of faith were bogus, and that there was no possible way that a virgin could spontaneously become pregnant! Mind you, this is the same Age of Reason that brought us to today where a global economy is driven by peoples' belief in a fat guy who flies around in an airborne sleigh propelled not by jet engines but reindeer can actually fit down most chimneys and bring tons of gifts to the whole world in one night!

What's more than the irrational story of the angel and Mary is that the irrationality of the gospel doesn't end there -- the story continues through a birth in Bethlehem, through a son who is named Jesus, who through miracles of feeding, of healing the lame, the blind, the incurable begins to be proclaimed as Holy. This Jesus proclaims an irrational good news of mercy and reconciliation from God, a mercy based on an unbounded love, if you can believe it! And as if that isn't enough, we are eventually asked to believe the testimony of dozens, no hundreds, well thousands of people who claimed to have encountered this same Jesus risen again alive and well three days after being publicly executed. It simply isn't rational!

No, it isn't rational, and thank God His mercy and grace isn't rational. Thank God that His love for the whole world is so great that He was willing to share with us the burdens and pains of life here, to demonstrate to us that while His grace and mercy may not make sense in human terms, it is nonetheless very, very real. If God's grace was based on human rationality and reasonableness, it would make sense: about as much sense as a spiral of revenge on beautiful beaches; as much sense as economic suppression of the majority of the world so that a privileged few can consume without limit; as much sense as bombing people to win their hearts and minds. No, thank God for His wonderfully irrational grace and mercy.

Thank God also for the wonderfully irrational response of people in faith. Without such irrationality the pews would be empty, but I invite you to look around. See around you dozens of examples of the same kind of wonderfully irrational response. Elders, who after their initial "who me?" reaction when called into God's service

responded, and continue to respond with “let it be with me according to your word”. Friends who serve and who have served on the Board of Managers, offering their time and talents in response to a call. People who follow their “you’ve got to be kidding” with “OK” when asked to help lead the service as a liturgist. Others who nervously step forward in response to a call to greet guests arriving for the service of worship. This wonderfully irrational congregation is made up of people who in one way or another have responded to a call to action from God, and who offer themselves in service in the kingdom, whether it’s cooking or serving breakfast, or mopping floors, or singing in the choir, or leading the choir, or teaching Sunday School, or running the sound system, or working in the office, or being the resident ‘pit bull’ clearing the doorways and keeping the children safe. Indeed, every one of you who participates in the life of this congregation, including joining in worship on a Sunday morning, is responding in a way similar to Mary’s wonderfully irrational acceptance of her call to serve.

And so here we are, as disparate a group as you might imagine, from places all over the globe, with backgrounds and experiences and interests as diverse as could be expected. But we are here together with one thing in common: our wonderfully irrational response to God’s wonderfully irrational grace. It makes no sense, but all thanks be to God for what He has done for us in that divine event first promised to that young virgin, and made real in Bethlehem on that Holy Night so long ago – for that wonderfully irrational love and grace of God has given us life eternal.