

Suttons Bay Congregational Church
 Luke 1:26-38

December 18, 2005
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26In the sixth month, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, 27to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. 28The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you."

29Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. 30But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. 31You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. 32He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, 33and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end."

34"How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?"

35The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. 36Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be barren is in her sixth month. 37For nothing is impossible with God."

38"I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May it be to me as you have said." Then the angel left her.

What were you doing a year ago? It was the week before Christmas. Think back. Maybe it's hard to remember. But, for me, the day is vivid, indeed, all of the days before Christmas 2004 were vivid. I was preparing for an interview with the Search Committee of this church that was scheduled for Monday evening, December 20. I was getting our house ready for my in-laws to visit, they were scheduled to arrive sometime while I was in that interview. And, whenever I could, I was drinking peppermint tea, eating candy canes, and rubbing peppermint scented lotion into the skin of my hands, arms, and face. Because, a week before Christmas last year, I was nine-months pregnant and I had heard that peppermint induced labor. And though the interview was important, and my in-laws visiting was exciting, all I really wanted for Christmas was a baby—or, more specifically, to not be pregnant anymore. My due date was January 6, but I was doing everything in my power to bring on labor because I was so done with pregnancy.

I'm not one of those women who loved being pregnant. But, miserable as I was, I wanted to try and make the most of the experience of pregnancy and childbirth, I wanted it all to be this wonderful celebration of womanhood and life. And so, I decided on natural childbirth—no epidural, no drugs. It proved to be one of the three stupidest choices, along with trying to take a bath with our cat when I was nine and

dating a boy named Deacon Pinkleman when I was in high school, that I've ever made. But. I did it. And I was able to do it, in large part, because of our doule'. For those of you unfamiliar with the term, a doule' is a person who is specially trained to help prepare a woman for childbirth, be present with a woman during childbirth to act as a coach and support person, and then to be available to the woman to help with postpartum issues such as breastfeeding and infant care. It's basically hiring someone to do for you what a mother or close friend would do for you if your mother and close friends didn't live so far away. So, for \$475, I had a doule' to help me through and I would recommend having one to anyone else who falls for that natural childbirth stuff of breathing through the pain or imagining that you're on a beach in Tahiti sipping a daiquiri instead of in a bed in Munson biting on an ice chip.

Because I had some experience with a doule', my interest was sparked when I read a commentary on this story about Mary and the Angel Gabriel, popularly known now as the immaculate conception, in which the author highlighted that in some ancient texts, Mary is referred to as God's doule'. In that context, the word is most closely translated into our modern word slave. And yet, that's a misleading use of the word. We think of slave as someone who is held against his or her own will by another with more power or influence. A more appropriate understanding of the word slave or doule' in this context would be *committed servant*. One who has a choice—after all, Mary did accept God's call on her life, at the end of the passage she says, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Though hesitant and not sure just what is in store for her, she agrees. And that's the kind of understanding of servant that is helpful here, someone who was pleased to be a support person to the one in charge because he or she believes in the other person and wants to help him or her succeed.

It reminds me of the butler in the Batman series. Sir Alfred was an ever-present source of support to Bruce Wayne. He was behind the scenes, never got to drive the cool, fast

Batmobile or wear a cape or swoop through the skies to save a damsel in distress, but he was the one who lit up the sky for our superhero, the one who let Batman know where to go and who to help. For Batman to be Batman, as super and as much of a hero as he was, he couldn't have done it without Alfred. Alfred was Batman's doule', helping him give birth to a new reign of justice and peace in Gotham.

And that's what God asked of Mary, that she, a most highly favored lady, be of assistance in giving birth to the Savior of the world, the one who's birth we so eagerly anticipate, Jesus the Christ. But the story doesn't end there. The deal is not sealed. God's work isn't done. When you read the paper or listen to the news, you know that we've a long way to go before God's reign of justice and peace are realized. Some more doule's are desperately needed. God needs some more folks like Mary, men and women who are willing to make a sacrifice and say, "Here am I, a servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." It doesn't appear that God is needing any of us to give birth to the Messiah to which I respond with a mighty, Thank God. But, God surely does need some committed servants, some doule's to help with the workload.

And that's what so many of you, indeed all of you, have done all year long. You may think you come to church for you, to see folks and get a bit of inspiration. But do you have any idea how much it means to everyone else that you're here? It does, it matters a lot. All fall I've been hearing folks say, with just a glimmer of surprise in their eyes as they say it, how good it is to be back in church. How much they missed it while they were gone, even though they hadn't anticipated feeling that way. And you are an important part of the reason why they missed it. And because you make this church a meaningful place to be, you are a doule' of God.

This church has also seen a record commitment in financial giving this year. I am so pleased to say there is no pledge shrinkage for 2005. That means everyone has fulfilled

their pledge. I have NEVER heard of that happening in a church. Never. There's always some kind of shortfall. But not here. You've risen to the occasion, you've followed through, and because of your giving—your very generous giving, the church is up and running, the staff is paid, the building is in good repair, and most importantly, the children of God who benefit from our mission giving, have food, clean water, shelter, education, medicine, blankets—the things they need for living because you give. You are a doule' of God.

And the list goes on. It's not just the things that happen here in church, it's the many things you do in the community, it's the prayers you say, it's the conversations you have, it's the smiles you share with strangers—somehow, I believe, this all goes into bringing the reign of God just a wee bit closer as we all draw just a bit closer to God through our words and deeds.

On this fourth Sunday of Advent, this Sunday when we lit the candle of joy on the Advent wreath, I've got a lot of joy—a whole lot more joy than I had a year ago I'll tell ya. And it's due in large part to being a doule' of God's in this place, here among you other doule's. And lest we just sit around thinking about what great doule's we've been, let us also look forward to the New Year, the new opportunities we will have to share God's hope, peace, love, and joy with a world in sore need of it. Thanks be to God for the joy of the season and the ways in which we've been called to live it and share it with other.