Texts:

- **John 1:19-34**
- **Luke 2:1-20**
- **Isaiah 40:3**
- **Psalms 32:1-2**

In the church year, this is not the Sunday after Christmas.

In the church year, this is, in fact, the fourth day of Christmas

—and there are twelve such days,

There had to be—after all, it took time for the baby to be born,

for Mary and Joseph to get him into those swaddling clothes,

for the shepherds to get their sheep settled

and make their way into town,

for the rituals of circumcision and sacrifice

in the temple,

for Simeon and then Anna to prophesy.

There was a lot going on that first Christmas—so let's also take time in our own lives

to savor this celebration of God's Incarnation

as a hungry, squalling, very small and very needy human being.

The miracle of Incarnation deserves

more than one day of thought and celebration.

This morning, our texts from the narrative lectionary, invite us

to consider side by side,

to compare and contrast,

to appreciate and wonder about two moments

in this divine drama of Incarnation.

First we have the story from Luke's Gospel about what happens

in the last days of Mary's pregnancy, through the birth of the baby,

and his first visitors, the rustic shepherds in the fields.

Second, and a bit jarringly, we have the story from John's Gospel

about John the Baptist facing some intense scrutiny

with respect to both his identity and his mission

before, finally, getting on with his message and his ministry.

Usually we look at these stories sequentially.

First the birth happened. Then many other things happened.

Then, some thirty years later,

we catch up with John the Baptist in the wilderness.

John is around in the first story,

but he is a five month old baby,

not mentioned but somewhere in the background.

Mary, if not Joseph and the shepherds, is around in the second story,

but she is a forty-five year old woman,

not mentioned but somewhere in the background.

Jesus is present in both stories too,

but not in the foreground of either story.

He might be the center of attention in Luke's story,

but he is a baby—no spoken lines, no action at all.

In the second story, Jesus is anticipated but not mentioned by name.

He appears but does not speak.

At first glance, it might seem that these two stories and their main characters

have little in common.

The story about John is a story about an outdoorsperson,

someone eating and sleeping rough, talking tough,

calling for repentance and transformation, impatient for change,

brash, strong and, somehow, attracting quite a following.

A following that was large enough and restive enough

to attract the attention of the local political and religious leaders,

and not in a good way: Who do you think you are?

What do you think you are doing?

Before too long, as we know, John will find himself imprisoned and executed,

the life of this talented, charismatic man of the wilderness

cut tragically, and violently, short.

The main character of the Luke story that we have for today,

Mary, the shepherds notwithstanding, is a generation older than John,

and ends up living much longer,

longer, of course, than her own son,

who met a tragic fate much like John's.

She appears in the Gospels and Acts,

and by legend, at any rate,lives until quite old in Ephesus.

For centuries, she has been portrayed as meek and mild,

an image that does no justice at all to the biblical witness about her.

But at least, in contrast to John,

she is a village woman,

living in and caring for a house,

living in and caring for a family,

living in and caring for her community.

She does not purport to gather a following,

nor does she get into trouble with the authorities or suffer a violent death.

The first thing that putting these stories side by side makes us think,

is that John and Mary, his cousin once removed,

are very different people in some ways.

They are both close to Jesus, but live very different lives.

But looking at these stories side by side,

and, of course, we also need to look at the shepherds,

also raises the question of how these stories,

and these characters are alike.

What do these stories share?

One thing to note is that both of these stories

are about sturdy, fit and strong people.

Mary did not make her home in the wilderness,

but she undertook two arduous journeys at a very vulnerable time of her life.

The first is early in her pregnancy, after her experience with Gabriel.

She gets up and hurries to see Elizabeth who is hugely pregnant with John.

It was a rough journey, in our measurements, some 80 to 100 miles.

It would have taken at least four or five days for anyone to make that trip,

let alone a young woman in her first pregnancy with morning sickness.

There's no record of any family member or friend going with her,

at best, she may have joined a caravan as a single traveler.

But certainlythere's no one assisting her,

no one particularly looking out for her safety and well-being.

Then, later in her pregnancy, in fact, very close to her due date,

Mary, and Joseph with her this time, undertakes another arduous journey,

not of her choice, but under duress.

This trip was similarly difficult—same rough terrain and about the same length.

and infinitely more difficult due to her advanced pregnancy.

Mary may not have lived out in the wilderness like John,

but there is absolutely no evidence that the wilderness frightened her,

or that she did not know how to handle herself in the rough country.

John the Baptist, Mary the mother of Jesus, the shepherds in the fields,
keeping watch over their flocks by night—these stories of the origin
of Incarnation, are filled with rustic, hearty folks.
It is no accident that the heavenly host appears to poor shepherds.
They are not the elite living in mansions with servants to attend them,
they are not academics, deep in their thoughts and books.
Not that academic types were not important.
After all, where would we be without Luke, or Paul?
But let us not forget that the gospel begins in the grassroots of its culture.
The gospel is for everyone, but it begins with common folk.
Looking at these two stories together makes that very clear.
The gospel is radically inclusive.
It has always been so; it will always be so.
The second thing we learn by putting these two stories side by side
is also important and, in some ways, the other side of the equation.
It offers a kind of balance.
And that is, that just because the Incarnation appeared first among common folk,
people who were not intimidated by wilderness, people who knew their way
through the rocks and hills of the mountains of Judea,
in no way means they were not thoughtful and profound people.
Clearly, neither Mary nor John are intimidated by the wilderness.
But more importantly, perhaps, neither Mary nor John are intimidated
by the religious and political forces arrayed against them
and against their people.
John,confronted by the powers, boldly quotes Isaiah,
both understanding his mission from within his religious tradition
and criticizing it, calling it back to its center, its soul.

Mary processes: keeping these things in her heart and pondering.

Luke, one of those thinkers to whom we owe so much,

gives us an important insight into what Mary is doing here.

The two words that he uses to describe her:

1) **keeping these things in her heart( )and**
2) **pondering( )**

both begin with the same Greek preposition—( ).

It's the same word we hear at the beginning of the word "synagogue."

It means: together, with, along with, accompanying.

A synagogue is a place where people gather together,

where they come alongside each other, where they accompany each other.

So what Mary is doing in keeping these things in her heart,

is gathering together the various pieces of truth she has been given,

her various experiences with Gabriel, Elizabeth, Joseph, the shepherds,

she's collecting, putting in one place, her heart, all that has happened.

What she is doing in pondering,

is throwing these bits and pieces alongside each other,

fitting them together, first one way, then another way.

We need to remember that Mary, in her heart work,

Is also the singer who burst forth at Elizabeth's house

with the most revolutionary hymn of the biblical witness.

Part of her heart work has to do with those brave words

about tyrants cast down from thrones,

rich people going away empty,

lowly people lifted up

and hungry people full.

One of the questions that arose for me this week,

is why didn't Mary get herself beheaded like John

or crucified like Jesus?

Her words are more explicitly radical, more explicitly revolutionary

than anything recorded as said either by John the Baptist

or by Jesus Christ himself.

I wonder if the reason Mary ended up living a long and full life,

wasn't an odd and rather ironic twist of patriarchy.

Could it be that her radical declaration of justice,

social reversal, and God's upside down kingdom,

was never taken as seriously as what Jesus or John said,

because she was "*just*" a woman?

Be that as it may, we can only regard both John and Mary,

Jesus' beloved mother and his affectionate childhood friend,

As commonpeople, who received God into their lives,,

and then both spoke and acted

with rare wisdom and uncommon courage.

They were both sturdy folk,

making their way through the physical challenges of the wilderness,

and also making their way through the challenges of oppression

with alertness and wisdom.

And although it's a little anachronistic to call them disciples,

they have much to offer us as examples of discipleship.

We are also common folks, not especially remarkable.

But, like Mary, we have been pondering this morning.

The two stories, considered together,

call us beyond our wants, beyond our fears, from death into life.

From across centuries and geography,

Mary, the village woman from Nazareth,

and John, the young man traipsing about the hills of Judea,

call us to confront our challenges,

whether they be physical, emotional, or spiritual.

They call us not to be intimidated by those who hold power over us.

They call us to repent of our fear, our inaction, our sin,

and open ourselves to the kingdom of God and its love and justice.

They call us to courage.

They also call us to think,

to gather the pieces of truth we have been given,

to fit them together, trying one way and then another,

to mull, to converse, to discern.

To act with courage—to ponder with wisdom.

To act for justice—to wait with humility.

It is the rhythm of the liberation theologians.

It is the rhythm of John and Mary.

It is the rhythm of Fellowship of Hope

for fifty years and counting.

Praise be to God!