

## **Fear not!**

Luke 1:26-33

December 14, 2014

Welcome to First Congregational ... playhouse!

What do you see? “Props” are tools for telling a story, a gateway for the imagination. Theater invites us to embark on a journey of the imagination, leaving behind where we are, how we are, what we are, to inhabit for a time, by imagination, another space, another time, another person’s experience.

These “props” invite us into Shirley’s story, Shirley Abramowitz. The play imagines at least three different worlds: Shirley’s world as a great-grandmother telling stories of her youth to her great-granddaughter in present-day Los Angeles; the world of those stories, of Shirley’s Jewish family living in 1930’s Brooklyn; and the world reimaged by Shirley and her elementary school classmates as they stage pageants for Thanksgiving and for Christmas. Shirley is ... Well, you will have to come and see for yourself! You will have to come and see the play, if you have not already!

Theater invites us to embark on a journey of the imagination. But to what end? For what purpose? Are you invited to use the powers of imagination so you will better know Shirley’s story? Or are you invited to use the powers of imagination so you will better know your own?

I am going to invite you now to exercise your imagination. But, as with any kind of exercise, you can’t just jump right in. You need to warm up first!

So, I want you to imagine yourself ... in this city (a city skyline portrayed on a painted mural), not looking at it from far away or from above, as we are now, but in it, walking its streets, seeing its sights, hearing its sounds. I want you to imagine yourself there in 1935. Use your imagination! Don’t see it in black and white or in the sepia tones of old photographs, but imagine yourself there, really there, living it. What do you see? What do you hear? Where are you going?

Who do you see? There, there is someone, walking toward you on the street. You know you know him, you know you know her, but you can’t remember how. He sees you, she sees you, and comes up to speak to you. Who is it? What does he say to you? What does she say to you?

Now imagine yourself in that same city, but it is empty. You are walking the streets, but there is no one else there, no one else anywhere. There are no

lights and no sounds, other than the wind whining through the gaps between grey and empty buildings. It is cold, but not the kind of cold that makes you shiver. It is a heavy coldness, a coldness that weighs on you and siphons away strength and will.

You walk, but you don't know where or why, because there is nothing to do, nowhere to be. There is no reason, no purpose, just emptiness, just you and emptiness.

Now imagine yourself in that same city, that same empty and lifeless city. Imagine it filled with light, a kind of light more powerful than the light of the sun, but not hot or bright like the sun, just strong and pure and clear. The light fills everything, bathes everything, engulfs everything. It does not burn you, this light. You do not need to shield your eyes, but in it, by it, everything is clear, nothing is in shadow, everything appears, everything is seen, as it is.

And from the light or with the light comes sound. You can't hear it, but you feel it and know that it is sound. The waves of sound enter you and enter everything, and all around you buildings and streets and lampposts and fences begin to melt, to melt and drip away and collect into puddles that in turn melt and drip away and disappear.

Then it is just you. Just you and the light. You surrounded, engulfed, overwhelmed, infused by light. And from the light or with the light or from within you -- you can't say -- a voice speaks with the same inaudible but palpable sound. A voice speaks to you and calls you by name ...

OK. Are you warmed up? Are you ready to exercise your imagination?

I want you to imagine that you are Mary.

*"Don't be afraid, Mary; God has been gracious to you. You will become pregnant and give birth to a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High God. The Lord God will make him a king."*

You are Mary. You are eighteen years old, or sixteen, or fourteen, or twelve. You are a girl, a Jewish girl, a poor Jewish girl, unmarried but promised, not yet having begun your life as a wife or as a woman, and you are told -- by an angel from God? -- that you will become pregnant and birth a king. How do you feel? What do you think? What do you do?

Look at her. Look at her through the artist's eyes, through the eyes of Henry Tanner's imagination.



What do you see? What is she thinking? What is she feeling? What is it like to be Mary, at that moment?

But leave Henry Tanner's Mary behind now. Use your own imagination. Because that's what the Bible itself invites you to do! Its details are spare. It doesn't tell you what to think or how to feel, but invites you to relive the story. It invites you to live the story. You are Mary. What does it mean to hear this news? What does it mean to be told: "The Lord is with you and has greatly blessed you?"

*"Don't be afraid, Mary."*

What are you afraid of?

You know, don't you! Not what the people of Jerusalem were afraid of. They were afraid God had abandoned them. Not what Zechariah was afraid of. He was afraid God wasn't paying attention. They were afraid because they didn't think the Lord was with them, but Mary is afraid because the Lord is with her!

The Lord is with you ...

The Lord is with you ...

Do you find it comforting? Or terrifying? Or both?

This is where I am asking your imagination to take you, to a place where it is just you and the Lord ... this One with you, the One whose name is unspeakable, whose being is unknowable, whose power is beyond than any power in the universe because it was the power brought the universe into being, whose wisdom is deeper than the deepest reaches of ocean or of space, the One who has always been and will always be, the One who is.

What does it mean to be Mary? To be singled out by God, to be chosen by the Most High God, to be told ... that the Lord is with you?

Go there! Be Mary! Be in that place where all the things that you most rely on -- reason and good sense and productivity and good planning and the lessons of history and good intentions and good instincts and human possibility -- mean nothing. Be stripped bare of anything and everything you have to hold on to, of everything and anything you have counted on. It's just you ... and the Lord. The Lord choosing you ... The Lord calling you by name ...

*"Don't be afraid, Mary."*

Because? Because the Lord is with you! The Lord is with you. It is both the source of the fear and its cure. Because, in the presence of the Holy God ...

Well, you will have to see for yourself. Because we are not talking now about Mary's story, but about yours ...