She was so young – a child, really. She was confused and bewildered when an angel came to tell her she would both conceive and give birth to a baby, a boy whom she was to name Jesus. The angel told her that Jesus would be like no one the world had ever seen and would be called the Son of the Most High. Mary stood silently as the angel assured her that Jesus, her baby, her flesh and blood, would reign over the world forever. But how could any of this happen? Mary was engaged to a man she loved, a fine young man named Joseph, but she would wait until marriage to share a bed with him. There was no way she could be carrying a baby, let alone give birth to so special a child. The angel wasn't finished. Elizabeth, Mary's relative, had tried her whole life to have a child but had not been able to. The angel told Mary that not only was she to have a baby at her young age but that Elizabeth, too, was pregnant far past the time anyone would imagine *that* was possible. Somehow, this good news was enough to break through the barriers in Mary's heart and mind. And Mary said, “Yes, I see it all now: I'm the Lord's maid, ready to serve. Let it be with me just as you say.”

Mary went at once to see Elizabeth, to see if what the angel had told her was really true. It was so true that Elizabeth's baby jumped inside her when Mary appeared, for Elizabeth knew already that Mary was to bear the holy child, the one whom Elizabeth would call her Lord.

Then Mary sang a song of praise: “I'm bursting with God-news; I'm dancing the song of my Savior God. God took one look at me and look what happened – I'm the most fortunate woman on earth! What God has done for me will never be forgotten, the God whose very name is holy, set apart from all others.” And then Mary looked back on all the things God had done for God's beloved children. She said, “ He bared his arm and showed his strength, scattered the bluffing braggarts. He knocked tyrants off their high horses, pulled victims out of the mud. The starving poor sat down to a banquet; the callous rich were left out in the cold. He embraced his chosen child, Israel; he remembered and piled on the mercies, piled them high. It's exactly what he promised, beginning with Abraham and right up to now.”

Young, poor, pregnant Mary. In any other time or circumstance, her situation would spell disaster for her and her family. But now, God's plan and Mary's willingness meant the Savior of the world would come through the one least likely to bear him. But bear him she did.

The boys grew, Jesus and Elizabeth's John. John became the kind of “back to nature” man people crossed the street to avoid when he did come to town. He dressed funny and smelled funny and he ate what he could scavange from the woods. Right there in the middle of the wilderness the Spirit got ahold of John. John was moved to proclaim that Jesus was about to claim his birthright and begin his reign. John cried out, “This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, 'The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.” Somehow John's message reached peoples' hearts. They started going out to where John hung out. John met them and invited everyone who came to confess their sins and leave them there in the woods. John baptized people at the river Jordan, making them one with Jesus. Then John baptized Jesus, too.

More time passed. Jesus called twelve men to help him and began his ministry in Galilee. The group began ministering to crowds of people who were transfixed by Jesus' upside-down vision of how the world would be changing. Those who mourned would be comforted, Jesus told them. The meek would inherit the earth. The merciful would receive mercy and the pure in heart would see God. The peacemakers would be known as the children of God and those who were persecuted for righteousness' sake would inherit the kingdom of heaven. Jesus taught people that they should treat others as they wanted others to treat them. Jesus did crazy things; he healed lepers and those possessed by demons. He befriended outcasts. The powers that be heard the things Jesus was saying and doing and they vowed to put a stop to him.

John wound up in jail because Herod didn't want to listen to him anymore. John had a lot of time to think when he was behind bars and he began to question things he had taken for granted. John summoned one of his followers and sent a message to Jesus: “Are you the one to come or are we to wait for another?” There was such longing wrapped around John's doubt! If Jesus were truly the Son of God, why had he let John be arrested and thrown in jail? Why didn't Jesus come and get him out? Did Jesus really have any kind of power or was he all talk and no action? John had warned people to prepare for Jesus' reign. John wanted for Jesus to come and shake up the powers that be, the powers that had put him in jail but he wasn't seeing any of that from Jesus. Doubt started to replace faith as John counted day after dreary day in his prison cell. “Just tell me, Jesus,” John must have prayed. “Just tell me if I have wasted my time with you and I will start waiting for the real Messiah to come and unlock my cell.”

In all the generations to come since John, people have had their doubts. The story about Jesus' birth in Bethlehem, the announcement of his reign by John, the promise of everlasting life that starts here on earth: they fill our Christ's followers with faith...until. Until that horrific diagnosis. Until a beloved's death. Until an unexpected betrayal. Until a child's departure to the battlefield. Until a job's end. Until. “Are you the one we've been waiting for?” God's people cry. “Are you the one or should we wait for someone else? Someone stronger, more decisive, more threatening?”

John wondered it. Maybe some of Jesus' other disciples did, too. But Jesus never promised any of them - or any who were to come - an easy life. He never promised to take away their troubles, but to walk with them through times of danger and doubt, to be their strength when they felt weak, to find them when they feared they were lost. Jesus never offered any explanations or incentives to his disciples, no “Follow me and I'll make life easy for you.” Jesus simply said “Follow me,” then set off with his band of baffled disciples. Mary, Elizabeth, John, all who followed them: God loved not the people they were trying to be or hoping to be or promising to be, but the people they actually were, with faults and failings, hopes and dreams, and all the rest. These very ordinary people did not have to change a thing about themselves, just let the Spirit open their hearts and live there. Generations of faithful have followed them, ordinary saints who knew, who know nothing of their promise until their mouths utter it: “Yes, I see it all now: I'm the Lord's, ready to serve. Let it be with me just as you say.”

Amen.

*Advent 3A*

*December 11, 2016*

*Floyd-Willis Lutheran Parish*

*Matthew 11:2-11*

That is, we wait for the one who continually renews our life, giving us ever-new beginnings. John the Baptist can only point to that one who is coming. Our whole lives desire to be like John the Baptist's witness: pointing to our deep hope in the one who comes, the little child leading the wolf and the lamb, the leopard and the kid, the calf and the lion, the one in whom peace is embodied.