How many of you have put up Christmas decorations this year? How many of you have put lights on your houses? You may sit in the quiet of your living room watching candle light bounce off the walls of your home, and revel in moments of peace and contentment. It is only during Advent and Christmas that we allow ourselves to wonder about the mystery of things and events not easily explained, because Advent takes us on a journey of mystery.

The lack of mystery in our modern life is our downfall and our poverty. Dietrich Bonhoeffer would tell us, “We retain the child in us to the extent that we honor the mystery.” You might be already thinking, “I live in the real world where I work a job, care for my aging parents, or I am managing my own health concerns, so talking about mystery has no real benefit.

But, then as Christians we come to the Advent season, and we suddenly become the giddy child rushing out to cut down a Christmas tree to uphold long-held traditions from our families. We purchase gifts to share with our loved ones. We drag out the Christmas decorations with flourish, turning the insides of our homes into a Christmas wonderland we have fabricated to make us feel like there is something mysterious and different about the month of December. And, if you have looked around your neighborhood, each year people are lighting their houses earlier and earlier. There seems to be a real need for us to bask in things we cannot explain, or even want to explain. So why do we want to revel in the Season of Advent and Christmas.

I suspect we are hoping that love will surround us; a hope and love found in a God who states that life can be different, where we can have a life filled with wonder and love, regardless, of our financial status. If I could choose only one story in our Scripture lessons to speak of love and mystery, it would be our Gospel reading from Luke this morning. I would probably start our Scripture lessons in Luke 1:26 rather than verse 39 to give more context to the storyline, but these verses are designed to pull us out of our practical space and throw us into a space of wonder and mystery that theologians, historians, and regular people, like myself, are still trying to understand.

A story was written many centuries ago about a young girl named Mary. The Gospel of Luke this morning tells us that the Angel Gabriel visits Mary and announces that she is to give birth to the Son of the Most High. It is a familiar scene that has been retold many times, in literature, art, and music.

Although the story is familiar, it is still astounding. For generations, Israel had been waiting for the coming of the Messiah. Jews were living in a time of darkness under Roman occupation and oppression. Then, after years of waiting and hoping, it comes down to this one event. What Christians might consider to be a pivotal moment in the history of the world centers around this young, woman, Mary. She receives a visit from an angel, and is then invited to trust the angel’s announcement she will bear a child, a child who will be the Son of God, and who will sit upon the throne of David, and whose kingdom will have no end.

Israel has a long history of great and powerful leaders such as Abraham, Moses, and David. Yet for this singular event, God chooses Mary. Mary lives in the small town of Nazareth. She is young, perhaps even a teenager; she is not yet married, but engaged to Joseph, a simple carpenter. To the world all around them, Romans and Jews, Mary would seem to be a very ordinary girl, who comes from an ordinary place. And that is the power of her story.

Mary has her doubts and fears, of course. She asks, “How can this be, since I am a virgin?” And Gabriel’s answer is enough, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the most high will overshadow you.” She then is told that God has also worked a miracle in the life of her relative. Elizabeth, long past the age for bearing children, is now in the sixth month of her pregnancy. Gabriel concludes with these powerful words, “For nothing will be impossible with God.”

And Mary, though she could not understand this mystery, gives herself to it. Mary, still full of questions and perhaps doubt, chooses to trust. We cannot know exactly what Mary might have thought, or what she felt in her heart. We cannot understand how this mystery of Jesus’ miraculous conception came to pass. But the story is clear on this. Mary, young, alone, and facing the unknown, chooses to trust God. She offers the most wonderful response a human can offer to God, “Here I am, servant of the Lord, let it be with me according to your word.”

What a powerful, holy moment. Heaven and earth waiting. The coming of the savior depended on that moment. Look how much depends on the faith of one young woman! Imagine all that was waiting upon her response. Imagine what faith God and the angels must have had in her. Imagine how Mary felt, and what she chose to do next. She ran to see Elizabeth. Mary rushes to visit a person who had the ability to believe in mystery; A woman who could believe that the Holy Spirit can create a baby.

When our lives are thrown upside down, we go to people who can listen to our concerns, even when we may be a bit irrational. We choose people who understand that not all parts of life are easily solved or explained, sometimes, a person just needs to share the moments of surprise and shock with another person. I suspect Mary may have felt that way. Mary needed another person to validate her experience with the Angel Gabriel. And as the story unfolds, that is exactly the blessing Elizabeth gives to Mary. She believes what Mary is telling her.

For the linear-thinking people in our service today who may question the validity of these infancy stories, then you, too, bring another piece of the mystery for us to ponder. There are plenty of questions concerning the legitimacy of our Scriptures this morning. Good questions have been asked, like, “Was the author of Luke trying to establish the legitimacy of the resurrection of Jesus by creating a narrative for Jesus to be holy as a baby?” This is a good question, considering the fact the author of Luke wrote this gospel about 50 years after the resurrection of Jesus. Questions do not create doubt, they actually provide the search engine for seeking out the truth. But, if we had to name the mystery embedded in the story of Mary and Elizabeth, we would bump right into one word that Scripture is filled with. That word is faith.

Faith, as described in The Letter to the Hebrews, chapter 11 says this, “This trust in God, this faith, is the firm foundation under everything that makes life worth living. It’s our handle on what we can’t see.” Can we place our trust and faith in a narrative that can either be true or a legend, and know the Gospel writers’ true intention was to show the God in Jesus, the God in us, and the God in all people?

Each year my house, probably along with yours, begins to tell the story of Jesus. You may follow an Advent calendar. You may read an Advent devotional book. The baby Jesus may lay in a manger alongside some animals. Lights may twinkle on a tree, and candles may fill you with peace. You decorate, as I do, to remind yourself that hidden in the story of Jesus is a mystery that cannot be easily explained, the mystery that God loves us, and is with us. Amen.