

Sermon Advent III Year B December 18, 2011

Luke 1:26-38

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God." Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her.

Looking to God without the Answers

God could have chosen the temple in Jerusalem as the site for this announcement, but instead chooses the lowly town Nazareth, located far from the temple and tainted by the pagan religions that surround it. God chooses a lowly person in a lowly place to contrast with the glory of the Son of the Most High, who will "reign over the house of Jacob forever".

One of the stories in our pageant today is the story of Gabriel's annunciation to Mary. Taken with the Magnificat (see last week's commentary), this is a story of Mary consenting to enter into a disreputable condition, trusting that, despite all appearances, she is entering into holiness. Charles is intrigued by what Luke does not say here. He says that Mary was a virgin when Gabriel showed up. Mary also says that she is a virgin when she asks how this birth is supposed to happen. But Gabriel's answer seems to skirt the issue.

All he says is that, through the power of the Holy Spirit and the Most High, the child to be born will be holy, contrary to all expectations. There is nothing about the mechanics of conception here. Luke is passing on a tradition he has heard about Jesus' "virginal" conception. But his reticence causes Charles to wonder if Luke did not have his own questions about the "how" of her condition. It was a disreputable condition overshadowed by God and thus made holy. But it does not say anything about what DNA testing might reveal. Helene remarks that this could be an important issue to raise, not only because the claim of a virgin birth sometimes creates a stumbling block for thinking Christians whose belief in science inhibits their acceptance of the gospel, but also because it uplifts women struggling in a similar situation – unwed mothers who are shunned by society. The passage is a reminder that God uses people in all sorts of conditions and situations – even those whose conditions smack of what reputable persons, especially Christians, might call sin. God not only uses unwed mothers, but chooses them and sanctifies them. Perhaps these conditions are not really sin, or at least, not in all circumstances, or perhaps God does not use the criteria of sin versus not sin in choosing God's most valuable players.

All this is Good News, of course. God is making provision for the salvation of his people. The Good News is that God has a place and plan for every person — even the ordinary person — especially the ordinary person. God calls Mary to be mother of the Lord, but calls every mother to raise her child in the nurture and admonition of the Lord.

In her reflections on Mary, **Barbara Brown Taylor**, an [Episcopal](#) priest, professor, and theologian and one of the best known preachers in the U.S., writes,

*"Mary wins her place in history
not for her cleverness, nor for her beauty,
nor even for her goodness.*

*She becomes the most important woman in the world
simply because she is willing to say yes to an angel's strange
proposal
without a clue where it will lead her.*

*Doing so, she becomes the prototype for all of us
who are invited to bear God into the world.”*

God's favor that the angel tells Mary she has with God is a two-edged sword. God offers mercy but no life of ease. To bear God in the world has both a promise and a cost to it.

Mary gives us one of the best examples I know of a faithful response to an unforeseen and unlikely – and uninvited – circumstance of life:

“Let it be to me according to thy word.”

Well, I submit to you this is the first ingredient of a faithful response – to say yes to God even though you have no clue where it will lead. I know sometimes this seems impossible, but I'm living proof that it can be done. I see myself as largely a cautious guy. I don't think I take big chances, yet In 1999, everything in my life changed. I was Vice President of an organization and many said at the height of my career. I knew my work was done there and I had no idea what I wanted to do with the rest of my life. So, I simply left my job with no plans for the future...no job prospects and no career path. I did so on the simple belief that if I closed one door another one would open. Eight years later I found myself as an Episcopal priest...something I never thought would happen. I'm a father of three small children and have had a 30 year union with my spouse. Who knew? Not I.

While the road was far from smooth, I have learned that one can step out in faith...not foolishly, but in the confidence that God will walk with you.

Another aspect of faithfulness is not to lash out in anger or strike back in rebellion when things don't go your way, but to consider what God is up to and how God might use an unforeseen circumstance to bless you and strengthen you in faith.

This is an important message as many of us here today take a moment to recall the losses we've had over the past year and offer them up to God for healing and in remembrance. Each situation of loss has another side if we dare to let ourselves experience it...it is the many joys and small miracles that are present in situations of great suffering and loss. It's the people who come forward with a

word of comfort or support. It's the cards and phone calls. It's seeing peoples' hearts changed and moved in the midst of pain.