

4th Sunday of Advent (Year B)

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*Luke 1:26-55*

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 for ever, 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.

In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leapt in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leapt for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.'

And Mary said,  
'My soul magnifies the Lord,  
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,  
for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.  
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;  
for the Mighty One has done great things for me,  
and holy is his name.  
His mercy is for those who fear him  
from generation to generation.  
He has shown strength with his arm;  
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.  
He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,  
and lifted up the lowly;  
he has filled the hungry with good things,  
and sent the rich away empty.  
He has helped his servant Israel,  
in remembrance of his mercy,  
according to the promise he made to our ancestors,  
to Abraham and to his descendants for ever.'

Tricia and I returned yesterday from two wonderful days in Manhattan. As we walked up and down the streets and avenues, strolled in and out of theaters, and made the particularly unfortunate decision to visit FAO Swartz on the Friday before Christmas, we continue to be amazed at the sheer scope of humanity that is concentrated in such a small area. Walking around the City, we enjoy being reminded of the enormous diversity of the everyday folks who are just trying to make their way in this life. And it reminded me of the amazing fact that today's lectionary passage reminds us of: that God didn't choose a big-wig, prominent, theologically trained, business savvy, or influential person to bear God's reality into this world in the flesh. God didn't choose a Nelson Mandela, a Barack Obama, a Desmond Tutu, a Billy Graham, a Mother Teresa, a Jackie Kennedy, or an Oprah bear and nurture Jesus Christ. God choose a teenage peasant girl and her ordinary fiancée.

Let's just take a minute to appreciate the weirdness. When any corporation or church or NPO or the like look for a position to fill, they spend countless hours vetting the candidates and they tend to select those with the most qualifications, the most education, the most experience, and the most influential recommendations. Mary had none of these things. No education, no job, no qualifications that you and I have been taught to respect. She would not have worked in a New York City high rise or have a summer home here on Shelter Island. She probably would have lived in a shabby public housing in the ghetto if she had any home at all. No, Mary didn't have a padded resume. The only reason, we are told, that she is selected for the job is that God just....liked her.

I like to think that Mary, cowering before this angelic messenger, interrupted Gabriel to ask "why me?" In my imagination, I see Gabriel responding by saying something like, "Hell if I know! I'm just the messenger! It's not my job to ask questions. God thinks you're the person for the job so...here we are!"

Perhaps, in these final days of this season of Advent, we might be reminded that sometimes God erupts into our lives and calls us to do important things and, also, that there is very little evidence in the Bible that supports the notion that God cares much about what we think we can and can't do. For example, God appeared to Moses in a burning bush and Moses insists that he can't lead because he stutters and isn't a great public speaker. God says, "I don't care. You're the one for the job." Jeremiah, when God sends him to be a prophet to a people in exile, insists that he can't do it because "he's only a child." God says, "I don't care. You're the one for the job." A little bit later, God shows up through and tells Mary that's she will bear a son who will be called the Most High and she is scared and says "how can this be for I am a virgin." God says, "I don't care. I like you. You're the one for the job."

Believe me when I tell you that if God allowed us to disqualify ourselves from service because of reasons that we come up with or are forced to believe, then there would be no pastors, no prophets, no disciples, no ushers, or missionaries, no Sunday school teachers or choir members or deacons. No one, not one of us, is worthy of bearing the life and light of Christ in this world. But God doesn't care. Sometimes God comes to us and says that there is a job to be done and the only thing we need to know is that God, for some reason, favors us and that we're not going to be alone along the way.

Mary's story reminds us that we are called to bear the life and light of Christ in this world in so many ways. For some of us it is volunteering at a hospital. For others it is by making a living as a pastor or choir director or sexton or secretary. For others it is taking care of our aging parents or nurturing our growing children or accompanying a spouse in the last days of their life. For some of you, you might be considering whether or not God is calling you to serve as a deacon or elder at this very church. Whatever the numerous ways that God calls us to service, it is good for us to remember that it is normal for fear,

confusion, and anxiety to accompany divine commissions. In fact, one of the most common phrases in the Bible is the phrase “do not be afraid.” It is also, then, not surprising that this phrase tends to come from the mouth of a messenger of God. Mary’s encounter with Gabriel is certainly not the first time in the Bible that a messenger of God appears to a potential worker of God’s calling and feels the need to tell that person to relax!

To help Mary relax and realize that everything is going to be alright, Gabriel decides to share with her some other miraculous news. Gabriel tells Mary that her cousin Elizabeth who, as a slight detail, was well past the age of child birthing, is already in the sixth month of her pregnancy and, therefore, nothing is impossible with God. This news of John the Baptist’s miraculous birth via her cousins Zechariah and Elizabeth apparently calms her and inspires her to accept God’s call for her to be an integral player in the salvific narrative of all the world. Isn’t it interesting that sometimes all it takes to summon the courage to accept something God is calling us to do is to hear the stories of others who have experienced God’s call on their lives.

In this season of Advent, we are preparing to welcome Christ again into this world and are also preparing for a new year in the life of Shelter Island Presbyterian Church. In this time “between Noel and Auld Lang Sine,” I am reminded at how important it is that we share with each other the stories of the ways in which God has erupted into our lives at the very moment when we expected it the least. In this Advent season and in the seasons to come, how might you and I be called to serve as messengers like Gabriel who are called to convey stories of comfort and wonder to those who are being called upon to serve? As our “Come, Emmanuel’s” turn into “Joy to the World,” how might you and I be encouraged to embrace the possibilities of God’s actions in the world by ignoring the voices in our heads that tell us that we have no part in it? How might you and I respond to the enfleshed reality that Jesus’ birth means that the only qualification we need to serve God is to understand that God favors us and wants to be with us!

We will all find our own ways to respond. Some responses we will enact as individuals, going about our lives on and off this little island. Some responses we will embody together, in the work and worship that God is calling us to do in the next year. Mary’s response was a beautiful song that we have come to know as the “Magnificat.” *My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of her servant...*

What will our songs be in the year to come? What melodies will arise from this sanctuary, from the streets, from the city, from the world as God’s messengers come bearing us invitations for divine intervention and imagination? Will we sing or will we stay silent? Will we embrace God’s invitation or be trapped by our own insecurities? Will we walk away or will we echo Mary’s courage and say “Here we are! Let it be with us according to your Word”? As the angels depart and the songs of Christmas fade until the next Black Friday, may you and I welcome the birth of Christ our Savior by promising that our Magnificat may continue to ring in the year to come, through thick and thin, high and low, easy and hard. May our promise this day be strengthened by the promise God has made to us: that nothing is impossible and God is with us. What more could you and I possibly ask for?