

Fourth Sunday of Advent December 20, 2020

Luke 1:26-38

What was Mary doing when Gabriel appeared to her?

Collecting water? Cooking? Was it during the day? At night?

It was almost certainly as she was going about her normal day. Interesting, isn't it, God's messenger coming to Mary not in the quiet of the synagogue- the place of worship for Jews- but in the middle of her daily life. Her normal activity. God's presence is not contained to a building but is active...everywhere.

Mary is probably 13-14 years old- the same age as some of our confirmands.

What kind of young woman was she to stand in the face of this surprise encounter with the angel Gabriel and not fall into abject fear and terror as Zechariah did in the Temple when an angel appeared to him. Indeed, as most people do when in the presence of a messenger from God.

"Greetings, favored one, The Lord is with you." Gabriel says. What does this mean? Literally "favored one" means to make graceful, to endow with grace. That you are highly favored because you have been given God's grace. That the Lord is with you.

Mary is perplexed, not by the appearance of this angelic being, but by this greeting. The word translated as perplexed is a form of *tarasso* which means to stir, agitate back and forth greatly. It should read something more like, Mary was troubled, agitated by this greeting. She ponders, literally debates with herself, what this greeting might mean.

And well she might, as a devout woman of faith she would have been aware of the track record for those who God had “favored”. The encounter with God and God’s message can be disturbing to the one who receives it.

Moses, kicked from his pastoral life in Midian watching his fathers-in-law’s sheep and sent back to Egypt to go to Pharaoh and demand the release of the Jewish people.

Jonah, pulled from his town and sent to proclaim repentance to the avowed enemies of the Israelites.

Abraham, called from all he knew to go to a new land, one not even defined for him.

Mary takes that greeting and looks at it from all sides. Debates with herself whether this means good or ill for her.

While the angel tells her not to be afraid, it doesn’t seem that this composed young woman needs those words! She seems to wait calmly for the other shoe to drop.

“You have found favor with God,” Gabriel says, “and you will conceive and bear a son and name him Jesus.” And it will be great!

Really?

“How can this be?”, Mary says, “since I have no personal experience with men?” While betrothal at that time did bind the two parties together in a way that only death or divorce could change, Mary would have stayed in the household of her father. The consummation of her relationship with Joseph only happening after the wedding. “How can this be?”

“It’ll be like this,” says Gabriel going into a very general description of the Holy Spirit, and being shadowed, and Boom- we’ve got a holy baby. Easy peasy.

But Mary had to have known better. Particularly in the small town of Nazareth there would have been shame upon her and her family for this pregnancy out of wedlock. An assumption of wrongdoing on her part. It would be a burden for her to bear. A challenge to her betrothal, what would Joseph think? The very future she had envisioned, in which lay some protection for her, would be threatened by this.

Maybe her hesitation showed through, for the angel goes on to point out that her relative Elizabeth, long barren and thought to be beyond childbearing years, now is 6 months pregnant, for nothing is impossible with God.

It is at this point Mary responds, “Here am I” this response throughout scripture of the faithful to God’s call. “Here am I, the servant of the Lord.” Acknowledging the power dynamic between her and God (I am the Lord’s servant...slave) and yet. “Let it be with me according to your word.”

Did you hear that last? Even in the face of God’s almighty power, she almost gives permission for God to do God’s work. “Let it be with me according to your word.”

What depths are there to this woman, Mary?

God could do whatever God wants, “nothing is impossible with God” but she stands firm in the face of that power, ponders what it will mean for her, the turmoil and change, the danger, and then gives permission for what is to come.

Fully accepts the trials ahead. Mary is servant of God, yes. But she is so by her own acceptance, not one upon whom anything is thrust unwillingly.

What faith, to accept what will not be understood by others, but confident that God is indeed with her. The most unlikely of persons to bear God into the world, a young woman “owned” in a very real way by two men at this point. Without standing of her own. From a small backwater town in Galilee. God could have chosen King Herod’s wife, or even the Roman Governor Pilate’s wife to bear this child. A woman of privilege and means. But instead, God chose plain old Mary.

Mary is often portrayed as meek (we’ll even sing that line in our hymn of the day) but I imagine her looking Gabriel in his brightly burning eyes when she responds. A bold and courageous servant of God accepting on her own terms God’s call and all that it means for her. “Let it be with me according to your word.”

I agree with Bishop Mike Rinehart who writes, “I think Luke wants us to respect Mary’s faith, her trust of God, and willingness to put her life completely into God’s hands. I think Luke might want us to imitate her.”

What would it mean for you to utter those same words, “Here am I, servant of the Lord. Let it be with me according to your word.”?

What is God calling you to do? What would God have you be?

Don’t know? Then pay attention to your life. For like Mary, God’s calling often comes to us in the middle of our everyday humdrum lives. While preparing food for our family (a means by which God provides daily bread). While working at our jobs. While at school. While at play.

It is in these places that we can hear God's voice calling us. Perhaps not to bear God's Son into the world in the flesh, but certainly to embody Jesus for those around us. To love them as God in Christ loved us. To forgive them as God in Christ forgave us. To proclaim the Good News of the approach of God's Kingdom.

Don't know what God is calling you to, what God would have you be? Then spend time talking with God in prayer. Ask God to reveal to you where God would have you go.

Don't know what God is calling you to, what God would have you be? Then ponder the story of God's pursuit of God's people in scripture. See what God has called others to, who God has called them to be. Listen to the story of Jesus, God's own Son, and see what he did and hear what he called his followers to do and be.

Don't know what God is calling you to, what God would have you be? Talk with other people of faith. See what insight they might have about your gifts and calling. For we all have gifts that God can use to proclaim the good news of God in Jesus Christ.

And when you think God can't possibly use you, call you, that you have nothing to offer... remember the example of Mary, a regular young woman from a small town, called by God to bear an incredible burden, and the most wonderful gift ever given to us. And remember that with God, all things are possible.

Thanks be to God.