

ὁ λόγος παρακλήσεως
Advent 4-b; 24 Dec 2017
Epiphany Seattle – Todd Foster
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An Unplanned Pregnancy

In nomine...

Good morning, dear ones!

The Lord be with you!

This was the exchange between Mary and the angel Gabriel. It has been translated in a variety of ways through the years. “Hail Mary, full of grace” is a phrase that has been hallowed through extensive use, but it’s not that far off from, “Hey Mary, how’s it going?” The greeting was one a friend would make to a friend. It was a greeting of relationship. And so Mary was able to listen with an open heart.

What did Gabriel say to Mary?

Gabriel told Mary that she had found favor (or “grace”) with God.

Gabriel told Mary that she was about to conceive. That she would bear a son. And that she should name him Jesus.

Gabriel told Mary that her son would be great. He would be called the Son of the Most High, the Son of God.

Gabriel told Mary that her son Jesus would rule as a Davidic King. He would be the answer to the messianic hope of God’s people. Jesus would give God’s people pride and safety and independence when all they could see right now was Roman oppression and hegemony. This is like telling some poor, young, undocumented, Muslim woman of color living in a benighted corner of the United States that her unborn *daughter* will, without a doubt, be president of the United States fifty years from now. Those of us who live with privilege are accustomed to the

conceit that *anybody could grow up to be president*. But there are a lot of folks for whom that conceit does not ring true.

Gabriel told Mary that her son would reign over God's people forever. He said it twice: the kingdom of her son Jesus would never end. Unlike any other political system that ever has been or ever will be. The kingdom of Jesus will endure, said Gabriel.

What did Mary think when she heard all this? What could Mary think when she heard all this?!? Scripture tells us Mary was "much perplexed" and "pondered what sort of greeting this might be." It was a crazy kind of greeting, that's what it was! And it was a greeting which suggested great peril for Mary herself. Because for Mary, an unexplainable pregnancy would be a *very – big – deal!*

But – here's where everything changed. When the angel said to Mary, "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," that was the moment when Mary believed. Mary didn't know, but she trusted.

Why was Mary able to trust the angel when he was making crazy, unbelievable, incomprehensible promises to her? It was because of this: Mary knew the stories of the Bible. The God Mary worshiped had a long history of following through with miraculous children of promise. God had a long history of tender compassion for unlikely mothers. Sarah laughed. Rachel cried. Hannah prayed so fervently the priest thought she was drunk. Mary knew the stories of the Bible and she knew that those stories were her story. She understood the patterns by which God's people had witnessed God's work in their lives before, so she was able to hear and understand that God was at work in *her* life at *this* time. Mary didn't understand how or why or even what. But she understood who. She trusted God. Mary's response to the angel was as logical as it was stunning:

"Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."

The stories of Scripture, the cycle of the liturgical year, the drama of the Eucharist that we celebrate week by week: all these things are invitations and teachers for us about who God is and how God works in our lives. These are things that give our lives purpose and meaning and

hope. From these things we learn about how God acts in the world – not everything about God, but the major themes, the ways some of the most perceptive people who ever lived have used their 20/20 hindsight to understand a little bit more about God. Scripture and liturgical time and Eucharist all imprint on us the rhythms and truths that go deeper than mere facts about Virgin births and miracle stories, angelic pronouncements and ancient creeds. They teach us how to trust God.

Take resurrection, for example. Resurrection can be a pretty empty idea in my life. Yes, eternal life someday after I die. But what does resurrection mean when I lose my job or someone I love has died or an important relationship in my life just isn't working?

It is in the Bible we learn that resurrection doesn't come out of nowhere. Resurrection is what happens when God encounters destruction and chaos. In the very beginning there is only chaos and deep waters: these are the ingredients out of which God fashions the heavens and the earth. Israel as a people knew the destruction of slavery, then wandered in the chaos of the desert for 40 years. It was precisely in the midst of these experiences that God built them up and formed them into a nation of God's very own. Even Jesus, God in the flesh, experienced rejection, betrayal, weakness, and death – only to live again in a more powerful form. So the normal pattern is life-death-resurrection: it is those times of desert and chaos, those times of sadness and anxiety, that provide the building blocks for God to do something new in my life, for resurrection to become a possibility.

Scripture, Eucharist, and the liturgical year teach me how it is that God acts in my life today. They teach me to recognize the patterns, the telltale signs of God's hand at work, and even to trust that the pain and the emptiness that I might feel inside today are the raw materials becoming available for our faithful God to do something new and better in my life. I'm not saying that God actively causes desert experiences. But I am saying that when life happens, God redeems our pain. God consistently works to take the distress and the disorder and the death in our lives – and to re-shape it into light and promise and hope. God can do that. That's what it means to be God.

We gather here at Epiphany, week by week, to remind one another of God's promises to us. We gather and become angels of God, bearing God's message to one another. The words we say in liturgy, the conversations we have at coffee hour, cards and flowers and meals and hugs we

share with one another: all of these are *media* through which God shares God's love with us. Through these things we are invited to grow in our trust of God: God's goodness, God's love for us, and God's intentions for us. Trust enables us to move forward with imperfect knowledge. By faith in God we find our own agency in the world. By faith we discover that God holds the entire world in God's hands. By faith we find that we are loved. By faith Mary gave birth to the savior of the world.

For some Christmas is a joyous time. For others, it is one of desolation and sad memories. Even Jesus was born into a family in the midst of chaos and distress that soon made them political refugees. No one is exempt from spending time in the desert. But in my life, I have found it is in the desert that God does God's best work in me. Often it is in the desert that I am able to hear the faintest whisper of God speaking a redemptive word into my life.

On this last day of Advent, the mother of our Lord, blessed Mary, invites us to follow her example as we respond to God's words spoken into *our* lives: "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."

Sermon Questions:

1. What do you imagine was Mary's experience of the angel Gabriel and his message?
2. What is the connection between knowledge and trust in a relationship?
3. Where do you hear God's invitation? What is most frightening to you about that invitation?