

Second Sunday of Advent

December 9, 2018

Haven Lutheran Church Hagerstown MD

Readings : Psalm 95: 1-7; Luke 1: 26-38

“The First Disciple”¹

Grace and peace to you from God — Father, Son, Holy Spirit. Amen

In January of 2002, a hospital in London, England, mistakenly sent letters to over 30 unsuspecting patients informing them that they were pregnant. With a clerical worker's incorrect keystroke, instead of informing patients about a rescheduled procedure, the computer sent identical form letters telling the recipients that they were "with child." Among the recipients of the letters were six elderly men.² Surprise!

During a pastoral call, a three-year-old boy climbed in the lap of a pastor and whispered confidentially, "I know a secret!" The pastor asked, "Will you tell me your secret?" "Yes," the little fellow giggled delightedly, "but you mustn't tell my mamma." When the pastor promised not to tell, the boy continued, "My mamma's going to the hospital to have a baby. But don't tell her. Me and Daddy want her to be surprised!"³ Surprise!

Then there is Mary visited by angel Gabriel. From the New Testament writers we learn that Mary was a young Jewish woman, probably living in Nazareth up in Galilee, the northern part of Israel. The parents of Mary are not named in our Bible, but in a second century writing, Joachim and Anna are identified as her parents and said to be descendants of King David. When we meet her in the Scriptures, Mary is betrothed to be married to a Jewish man named Joseph, with whom she had probably never been alone or unescorted for any length of time. She was of marriageable age, maybe twelve or fourteen, when God's messenger, Gabriel, appeared to Mary announcing she had been chosen to bear God's son. Surprise! "For nothing is impossible with God."

When this encounter is captured in traditional paintings and stained glass windows, Mary is usually portrayed to be utterly composed as this magnificent angel kneels before her, holding a lily, olive branch or royal scepter — signs of purity, peace or heavenly authority.⁴ These may be beautiful works of art but was it really such a sedate scene? She's a teenager and an angel is suddenly standing before her. "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." Don't you think she just might have dropped the sewing or laundry in her hands and looked like a deer stuck in headlights? She is "perplexed," Luke says.

Surely this must be an understatement! Her mind must be racing in overdrive, “Who is this guy? Is it good or bad news that he’s here? What does it mean to be a ‘favored one’? Why me? I’m nobody special.” Even the angel notices things may not be going well. “Do not be afraid, Mary,” he hastens to reassure her.

Before she can catch her breath, Gabriel’s pours out the rest:

”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.” (Luke 1: 30b-32)

Pregnant before I’m married? That’s being in “God’s favor”? Who is going to believe that? And this son she is to have? Mary is Jewish. She knows “Messiah” language when she hears it. Isn’t it about time someone said, “Kidding, kidding... only joking!” But no one does. Surprise!

Barely able to take in all in, Mary grabs on to the concrete and practical. “How can this be, since I am a virgin?” Gabriel tells her the Holy Spirit has it under control. If you think this is unbelievable, let me tell you about your barren relative Elizabeth who is having a son in her old age? Surprise! “For nothing will be impossible with God.”

I wonder how much time really *lapsed* before Mary said “yes,” she would be a partner in God’s outrageous plan? We mustn’t make this encounter all feathery angels, heavenly light and haloes, with a Mary who has no struggles or doubt, OR we will miss the tremendous power of this gospel story. This ordinary, young woman is stepping out with great trust in God and astounding courage,” I am the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” Gabriel then departs, leaving Mary to face her parents, Joseph and her village with the news that she is pregnant by the Holy Spirit, carrying God’s Son, the Messiah. Surprise beyond all surprises. Mary steps into the unknown, having no earthly idea of where her life will go.

This would not be the last time Mary will be challenged or mystified by her “yes” to God’s will. She would be asked to follow God’s lead and do God’s will many, many more times. “When there swaddling clothes to be washed and meals to be prepared....”when she [and Joseph were] forced to take her baby, Jesus, and journey into Egypt, for fear that [Herod’s] authorities would be seeking to kill them. I

expect those days were a greater challenge for Mary than days when she had an angel standing before her, speaking directly of God's will for her life."⁵

We don't know much about [Mary in the years that followed,] "but we do know about those days when it wasn't an angel that mystified Mary, but her own son, Jesus. Mary and Joseph found his actions hard to understand that day when Jesus failed to leave Jerusalem with his family to return home, instead staying to debate the scholars at the temple" (Luke 2) When they found him, she must have been frantic: "How could you have done this to us? We were scared to death." "And young Jesus replied in a way that could only be regarded as impudent. 'Do you not know that I should be about my father's business?' he asked. To a woman whose life had involved much danger and difficulty because of this boy, that answer must have been difficult indeed."⁶ "Here I am, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." (Luke 1:38)

Then there would be the day, in front of the whole town, when she stood outside a house seeking her son. "'Your mother and your brothers are outside asking for you.' But Jesus said, 'Who are my mother and my brothers?' And looking at those who sat around him, he said, 'Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.'"⁷(Mark 3: 32-35) "Here I am, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word"

"Then at the cross...Despite the command by Jesus to his disciple to take care of her, every mother's nightmare was happening to Mary; she was a witness to the spectacularly slow torturous death of her child. But this is not the last we hear of Mary. The last we hear is in the book of Acts...Something has happened to Mary after Good Friday and Easter, and there she is. The one who had been so confused and disappointed, and had endured such pain because of her son Jesus, there she is a disciple, a [leader] of the church."⁸ "Here I am, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." (Luke 1:38)

There are those who think following Jesus, saying "yes" to being Jesus' disciple is a one-time decision. We say we believe in Jesus, show up for church, do

good when you can and that's it — you are a disciple of Jesus. But it's not like that. "There's no one time signing on the dotted line and you walk away with Jesus in your hip pocket."⁹ Look at Mary, the very first disciple... the very first to say "yes" to Jesus. It was more than that one moment before an angel. It was a lifetime of saying "yes" to dirty diapers and dishes & raising her boy. It was saying "yes", to letting her son go so he could following his calling into a public ministry that was dynamic and miraculous but also dangerous and deadly. It was saying, "yes" to the mystery of resurrection and God's mystifying ways of redeeming and saving all creation through regular people who also say "Here I am, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." (Luke 1:38)

"When you follow Jesus, he will take you places. Discipleship is not a moment but a lifetime. There will be ups and downs, peaks and valleys, just like Mary had. There will be times when your faith is vivid and undeniable, as if God's own angel were standing in front of you, speaking directly to you. But there will also be times when you are embarrassed before the whole town, time when you stand there completely puzzled, not knowing what to say or why. There will times when you will be at the foot of the cross, wondering how on earth [God could let this happen,] there could be such pain."¹⁰

"Well, then, remember Mary. Discipleship is more of a journey, with twists and turns, peaks and valleys, than a straight upward arrow. Discipleship begins not when we grasp Jesus, but when he reaches out and grasps us [in our baptism, through Scripture, in Holy Communion and a community of saints and sinners called a church.] Discipleship continues, not because we always completely understand, or because we are always completely faith, but because he keeps working with us, calling us to follow him down this narrow path of faith."¹¹ Today, "we give thanks to God for Mary, the first disciple, the first to say 'yes' to Jesus. We do not worship Mary but we certainly celebrate her and learn from her. Let Mary be among your companions this Advent. Don't be fooled by the sedate, meek and mild woman portrayed in most nativity scenes and portraits. Instead, sit with the brave,

faithful, powerful disciple who knows the joy and the pain of saying “Here I am, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” (Luke 1:38)

Linda M Alessandri 12/7/18

ENDNOTES

-
1. Title borrowed from William Willimon, “The First Disciple” Pulpit Resource, December 23, 2012
 2. "Hospital Tells Elderly Men They're Pregnant," Reuters, London, (Jan. 10) as cited by King Duncan in his sermon “Nothing Is Impossible With God” posted on www.esermons.com
 3. “You’re Going to Have a Baby,” *Wrinkled Wrappings*, John R. Brokhoff, CSS Publishing Company, 1995, 0-7880-0700-9
 4. Adapted from comments by Barbara Brown Taylor in her sermon “Mothers of God,” Gospel Medicine Boston, MA: Cowley Publications 1995, p. 150-151.
 5. William Willimon, “The First Disciple” Pulpit Resource, December 23, 2012
 6. William Willimon, “The First Disciple” Pulpit Resource, December 23, 2012 with adaptations
 7. Adapted from William Willimon, “The First Disciple” Pulpit Resource, December 23, 2012
 8. Ibid
 9. Ibid
 10. Ibid
 11. Adapted from William Willimon, “The First Disciple” Pulpit Resource, December 23, 2012