

The 4th Sunday in Advent B
December 24, 2017

Grace, Lexington
Fr. James

II Samuel 7:1-11, 16 Canticle 3 Romans 16:25-27 *Luke 1:26-38*

The Formidable Messenger

“In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David; and the virgin's name was Mary.”

This was a remarkable event. That Luke would describe so carefully that the angel Gabriel, a singular messenger of God, would appear to a young girl, a child really, probably no more than 13 or 14 years of age *makes* this event remarkable. Put yourself in Mary's situation. Here she is, a mere child in our culture, not yet through playing with dolls and dreaming of what becoming an adult will be like. But already she is beginning to face the harder realities and knowledge of adulthood. She has begun menses with all of the discomfort and ritual shame which goes with that in the early decades before the 1st century A. D. in Judaism. But she is growing up in other ways too, for she is betrothed to a man, Joseph by name, and

already her identity is taken from his name, not her own. Luke mentions Mary's name almost as if it were an afterthought. Even then it is only her childhood name, that of her parents is not mentioned. But for all of the drawbacks of being a young woman in Jewish society in those ancient times, this young woman had a rather bright prospect in that she is betrothed and to an honorable man—a man with an assured living, a tradesman, a carpenter. They lived in a despised and primitive little town, but their families were there and all was not bleak. The citizens of Nazareth were probably unaware that their town was despised.

But why would the angel Gabriel come to this child? Was it because she was special? Was it so great an honor that this child, or any child, would be thrilled by the prospects of such a visit? I doubt it. All of Mary's hopes were put in jeopardy by this visit. All her parents or Joseph had to do was catch a breath of the news that she was to be pregnant and her entire future would probably be gone. She would be put away in disgrace and shame, either to be stoned or turned out of house and heart to wander and make her way as she could. And everyone knew that as a fate sometimes worse than death.

Was she ecstatic over this heavenly visit? I doubt it. More than likely she was terrified.

I would suggest that the call of God always arrives seeming like a mixed blessing. It always finds us where we are and attempts to move us into another role, another circumstance. I did not ask to become a priest. I wasn't unhappy with what I was doing or where I was living. To be truthful, I didn't want it, priesthood, that is. But the call of God isn't fashioned to fit our desires, but to fit God's purposes. What is that purpose for you? You probably have some idea or you wouldn't be fighting it so deliberately. For you see the call of God comes to each of us in the same insistent, confoundingly persistent manner. We can turn it aside, we can say 'No', but we cannot pretend that it is not there. It is as if Gabriel stands in the room, and try as we might we cannot be unaware of his presence.

“And Gabriel came to her and said, “Hail O favored one, the Lord is with you!”

Wonderful! Just great! It's alright to believe that angels exist, but let me see one, and then all of life has to change. Think about it. What would change in your life, if the angel Gabriel would stand in

front of you and address you directly by name? Think you would be happy about it and would welcome the occasion? Mighty uncomfortable. I suspect it would be somewhat like facing death. Perhaps one's life would flit before one. In the presence of that being who knows only goodness and purity, how much would flood your mind of the gossip you have perpetrated, of the wrongs you have done others and have until that moment been able to rationalize, how much of your willful turning away from God would become painfully apparent? I wonder.

“Mary was greatly troubled at the saying, and considered in her mind what sort of greeting this might be. And the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus.”

Mary has her questions, her objections, her fears. Who wouldn't? Who doesn't? And she has her freedom. She can reject this visit and the visitor! She doesn't have to bear the holy child. She can go on and have children by Joseph, as she most certainly does, and not even that first child has to be the Messiah. She too can say, I

don't want to jeopardize what I have. I don't want to be a laughingstock. I don't want the wrath and jealousy of others. I don't want the mixed blessing. I don't want to pay the undetermined cost, the unexpected sacrifice. Let me pay my tithe. At least that is calculable and praiseworthy. But to have to say 'yes' to giving everything, to spending all I have in light of your visit, that is too much. We say that all the time. You probably said that about the tithe when the pledge card came around this Fall, did you not? Maybe you said, what I gave last year is enough, or I'll reduce my pledge a little bit to make a point of my being unhappy about the Vestry. And all the while forgetting that giving to God is entirely a spiritual matter, a matter of obedience and glad obedience at that. Yes, God expects that of everyone who claims the name of Christ, but even that little response, that measured, thoughtful tithe most of us reject.

But at this point in Gabriel's brilliant visit, Mary's greatness stands out for the first time. It lets us know that maybe she was chosen not just because she was betrothed to a man peculiarly well-fitted to become the father of the Messiah, maybe she was chosen for reasons beyond those of her kinship with Elizabeth who was similarly

with child, and so after a like-miraculous visitation, maybe Mary was also peculiarly well-fitted not only to be a child-bearer, but to be the the God-bearer, the bearer of the child Jesus. And what is that point of greatness which allows us this insight? It is the moment of response, “Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord: let it be to me according to your word.”

The angel departs, the child is conceived, and early in her pregnancy Mary goes to visit Elizabeth. St. Luke tells us, that she entered the house and greeted Elizabeth. “And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the babe leapt in her womb; and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit.” Note this for it always takes the Holy Spirit of God to recognize God's work in others. How did Elizabeth know? She did not, except by God's own witness within her. And Elizabeth in Luke's account, gives a threefold blessing upon Mary's entry to the house.

Blessed are you among women!

Blessed is the fruit of your womb!

Blessed is she who believed

Elizabeth, by the power of the Spirit of God, recognized

Mary's greatness. Not in the fact that she was bearing God's son, for the Greek word for 'blessed' in this third instance in Luke 1:45 suggests that Mary was pleased, was thankful, was happy about her response in faith to the angel. She begins right away in the Magnificat to give praise. "My soul doth magnify the Lord, and my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour." To exercise one's faith, to respond to God's call, and to believe it will turn out well, that is true greatness. And we can do that. We can take Mary as an example and learn from her faith, her belief in the goodness of God, and in God's willing for us the very best there is. Oh, the call may be uncomfortable as it surely will be, but if responded to in faith, all will be well, all manner of things shall be well. The favor of God sets Mary apart, but is no sign of her personal greatness. Any woman can bear a child. But Mary believed, she trusted God. Mary embraced faith. Mary put aside her own fears, her own plans, her prescribed future and said 'yes 'to God. She took upon herself more sorrow than one ought to have to bear. She took upon herself the insecurity of the flight to Egypt, of rejection, because her neighbor's in Nazareth never did put much stock in her strange offspring. She took upon herself

the fears a mother always has for a child who refuses to conform. She took upon herself the sense of shame and failure at his death as a common criminal in public view. But Mary believed....and in that was and is her greatness revealed. For that she stands today as the Blessed Virgin Mary.

And to that you are called. Called to respond in faith, faith that God will perform that to which he calls you. That can be the mark of your blessedness, your happiness, your thankfulness, your greatness.

The call of God is to follow God. And that may sound rather nebulous. But it never is really. For Mary it was to bear a child, blessed of God, yes, but a normal pregnancy and childbirth, nonetheless. For us the call of God likewise is always carried out in practical, doable ways.

I use the personal pronouns 'we' and 'you' and you may be taking what I am saying personally. I hope so, but I want to say that the call of God for us in this place is to a people, to the whole congregation. God is always calling to Godself a people. 'You' plural can be that people if 'you' plural respond to God's call like Mary. Oh,

yes, as individuals we have to say 'yes' to being one of the people of God, but God's great weapon in the world is love between people.

And you may remember the Evangelist John's way of putting it.

They, that is the world around us, will know we are Christians by our love. Well, right now in Lexington they know us by our fight. I was speaking with a young man, not of this congregation, this week, and when he found out that I was new to this parish, his first words were about the conflict. Other churches around town have and are receiving our members because of our conflict with each other, not necessarily our lack of love, but our very strange way of showing it, two years, at least, of not listening to each other, of not respecting those who disagreed with us, of not responding in loving, forgiving ways.

Oh, but you say, we're past that now. We are ready to move on. Let's forget the late unpleasantness, cut our losses and find a way to grow with someone else. Until we have found ways to work through the unfaced realities of our relationships in this place, we will never be ready to move on. Someone very dear to me is always ready to say, "I don't want to talk about it." Whoa! If we don't talk about it,

ask forgiveness where necessary face to face, we will never resolve it, one on one, or as the people of God.

Mary responded in faith. She believed the promise of God through the angel. We too are the called ones, and responding may be a little uncomfortable. I hope so for if it is not, it would not be much of a calling. *So be it.*