

Luke 1:26-38

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, 27 to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. 28 And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." 29 But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. 30 The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. 31 And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. 32 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. 33 He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." 34 Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" 35 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. 36 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. 37 For nothing will be impossible with God." 38 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.

GOD, NOT AT A DISTANCE

Walter Bruegemann said at a conference on preaching, "Few of our people imagine God to be an active character in the story of our lives."

I think that's true. Now don't misunderstand. We believe in God. It's just that most of the time we can't see how God is active in our lives. Like that Bette Midler song, God is watching us from a distance.

Of course, that is decidedly NOT the biblical view of God. God not only watches; God also gets involved. God intervenes in our life.

God is constantly at work in our world in big and small ways. And more than that God uses ordinary people like you and me to get that work done.

Today our Scripture lesson provides us with an example par excellence. The angel Gabriel bursts into the life of an unsuspecting teenage girl named Mary. And the angel tells her that she has found favor with God. She will conceive, carry and bear the Son of God.

Church tradition has assumed that Mary must have been special to be chosen for such a task. But, maybe God chose her because she was ordinary.

After all isn't that what the Christmas message is all about. The Word becomes flesh. The Divine becomes a part of the human.

Mary did not easily accept this message from above. She is afraid. She protests that she is a virgin, that such a conception is impossible.

She is a common, ordinary girl. She is not the stuff of legends, and she knows it.

It's only after she expresses this sense of wonder and dismay that she is finally able to accept and embrace the message from above. It's only then that she finds the courage to believe that God is indeed working in and through her.

Mary is indeed to be admired because she said, "yes" to God. God asked her to give up a lot in order to bear his Presence. And Mary said, "yes."

But, we do Mary and the good news a disservice if we turn her into some kind of superhero. If we do that, then we can safely keep her and her Divine child at a distance. We can keep God at a distance.

And the message of Christmas will not allow us to do that.

GOD, CLOSE TO US

But, what if the birth of Jesus means that God is not watching at a distance? What if God not only invaded the life of a young girl long ago but also invades our lives here and now?

Mary's role was indeed unique. She bore the Son of God. But, I would suggest that our role is unique as well. We too bear the presence of God to the world.

Look around at the people in our congregation. What if we believed that God favored them too? Suppose we believed that God planned to do marvelous things through them? And suppose God favored you and me as well?

Think about all the wonderful things that God wants to "birth," to accomplish through us. Suppose the angel, Gabriel brought you and me that message?

What would you say? Would you respond like Mary? Would you say, "How can this be?" Would you say, "This is impossible?"

Would you point out all the reasons that this is a bad idea? Would you say that you are not qualified to do the job? Would you be afraid?

I would check all of the above. In fact I check all of the above on a daily basis.

I'm not alone. All us struggle daily to hear and believe the good news of the incarnation. We have not trusted the good news to be good news for us.

We have not believed that something new, something of God can be born in us.

A MESSAGE THAT IS HARD TO ACCEPT

In several places, including our lesson for today the Bible talks about Mary “pondering” things. When the angel greeted her Mary was “perplexed and pondered what sort of greeting this may be.”

Actually that’s too weak a translation. It should be more like, “This troubled Mary greatly and her head was spinning as she tried to figure out what was going on.”

The text suggests a sense of struggle and fear. In fact you’ll notice that the angel responds to Mary as the angels respond to the shepherds a bit later in the story. The angel says, “Don’t be afraid.”

This is the universal reaction when the messenger of God confronts us with the call of God. There is fear and uncertainty.

Think about the call of the prophets of old. Moses said that he wasn’t a good enough speaker. Jeremiah said that he was too young and inexperienced. Isaiah said that he was too sinful.

But, God asked Moses, “Who made your mouth?” God told Jeremiah, “I choose you for this job before you were even born.” And God took away the sin of his servant Isaiah so that he could speak the truth to an unclean people.

I really enjoyed my time on Presbytery’s Committee on Preparation for Ministry. And quite often the people who felt called to ministry had been struggling with that call for a long time.

People gave up lucrative careers because they had been struggling with the call of God. They said for many years, “Surely there must be some mistake. God wants me to be a minister? I don’t think so.”

But, finally they gave in. Finally they said, “yes” to God’s call. Finally they were willing to believe that God had chosen them for special service.

A seminary professor had his students tell why they felt called into the ministry. His favorite call story was by a student, who wrote,

“I was the teenager from hell.” And he was. He made his parents’ lives utterly miserable. He was so irresponsible in college that he flunked out and spent a couple of years working.

While working, he met a woman and married. They began attending a little church. Gradually, he came to the surprising awareness that God seemed to be calling him, calling him into the Christian ministry. So he went back to college.

He dreaded telling his parents, after all they had been through, that now his life was taking this unexpected turn. But he told them the story of the surprising turn of events, the way that, though his life had been a series of mistakes and irresponsible actions, he now believed that God wanted him to become a pastor.

Suddenly, his mother burst into tears and she said, "I'm so ashamed! I can't believe this has happened!"

The young man was shocked by her response. "What do you mean?" he asked.

"I can't believe this has happened," she said.

"Didn't I tell you that before you were born I had had a couple of miscarriages? I didn't think we would ever have a child.

So I made God a promise. If he would let me have a baby boy that I could bring to term, I would name him Samuel and I would dedicate him to God, just like Hannah did back in the Old Testament."

Sam heard all of this with great astonishment.

"Why didn't you ever tell me?" he asked. "You could have saved me a whole lot of trouble if you would have told me about this."

"We're Presbyterians," the mother replied. "How was I to know something like this would work? I didn't even know that we even believed in this kind of thing."

If you think that the story of Mary being called by the angel Gabriel is strange, think again. Stories about God's call tend to be strange and a lot more common than you may think.

They are not strange because God sends an angel to call someone, though sometimes God does. Call stories are strange because of whom Jesus chooses to call. He calls ordinary people like you and me.

GOD HAS FAVORED US

Not all of us are called to the ministry. But, all of us are called to minister in the name of Christ. And quite often we are afraid of that call. We are perplexed about what God might be calling us to do. We toss and turn at night wondering, pondering the meaning of our lives.

The apostle Paul often talked about Christ being in us. That phrase, "in Christ" is one of the most common phrases in the New Testament. God was in Christ, and Christ is in us.

The birth of Christ was just the first installment in the Divine/human drama. The story continues with you and me.

A Lutheran minister told of going to a Catholic high school. She was a Lutheran preacher's kid and felt out of place in that school. That was especially true when she was required to attend an Annunciation Day mass.

She said that it was a day that Lutherans neither acknowledged nor celebrated. She was perplexed and surprised that classes would be delayed an hour that day in order to attend this worship service.

But, somehow despite all the unfamiliar religious ritual, the message that the angel, Gabriel gave to Mary came through to her as well. She said that she remembered being surrounded by girls, her friends and thinking,

“God has favored us. God has regard for me.”

We all talk about how crazy busy we are during the Christmas season. The symbol of this for me came as I drove back from Orlando this past Friday. I was at a meeting with other ministers that no one wanted to attend, but alas it was a meeting we had to attend.

All during the meeting phones rang with concerns that just couldn't wait. It was obvious that other things had been put on hold. There was weariness in the eyes of my friends.

On the way home the line of cars going to Millennia Mall backed out onto I-4. I managed to dart my way into the other lane and avoid the rush. I thought about how so much of this season focused on shopping and giving and going here and there.

I thought, “What an odd way to celebrate an event that began with such a quiet, private moment. In all this craziness we have to find some time to be still and hear the call of God.”

In all this craziness we do need to listen for that one angel who tells us that God favors us that God has chosen to work through us. That sounds impossible doesn't it? That sounds unrealistic.

NOTHING IS IMPOSSIBLE WITH GOD

But, the Christmas message is not about what is possible with us. The Christmas message is about what is possible with God. Did you catch that in our lesson for today? Mary asks, “How can this be?” And the angel of the Lord answers, “Nothing is impossible with God.”

In that meeting I didn't want to attend we had a season of prayer before we began. I prayed last because quite frankly I didn't have anything to say. A wise minister once told me that when you have trouble praying try praying God's word back to him.

And so I did. I prayed about Mary and her impossible call. And then I said something like, “Lord, we trust you to make things that seem impossible in our life possible.”

It was apparently the word that we needed to hear, and our meeting went much better than I had feared it would go.

Actually that translation in verse 36, “nothing will be impossible with God” could also be translated “from God no word shall be without power.”

When God speaks, things happen. The world is created through the command of God. And when God speaks the Word becomes flesh and dwells among us.

As I like to say so often, that’s not only true of what happened there and then; it is also true about what happens here and now. Somehow in our own life we’ve got to get from Mary’s “how can this be?” to the point that we can truthfully say, “let it be with me according to your word.”

In our lesson from Scripture that transition seems to take place fairly quickly with Mary. But, it has been my experience that the transition from “how can this be?” to “let it be” is never quick or easy. It takes a lifetime of struggle.

If you look at the whole gospel story you’ll see that this was true of Mary as well. Mary continued to ponder and struggle with the will of God. Sometimes she made the wrong choice, suggesting that Jesus should come back home where it was safe instead of doing his Father’s will.

But, the safe way was not the way of God. God’s way went through the desert and the way of the cross.

The good news always seems too good to be true, and like the prophets of old we are always talking about why things can’t be done instead of believing that in God all things are possible.

Our doubts will never be answered completely. In every situation we will continue to ask, “How can this be?” And yet somehow God gives us the courage to say, “yes” to His will. Somehow God help’s us move from “how can this be?” to “Here I am. Let it be according to your will.”

We know that this is never an easy process.

All we have to do is think about Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane to recognize that fact. He sweat drops of blood and asked if any other way was possible.

But, in the end Mary and her son Jesus had the courage to say yes. They were able to say not my will but Thine be done.

Nothing is impossible with God.

God's word does change things. In three short verses the peasant girl is transformed into a prophet. Mary the teenager becomes the mother of God. When God speaks the world changes forever. The word becomes flesh and dwells among us.

If we are to believe Mary's story, we must change how we view our own life. Who we are and what we can be is always subject to the call of God.

GODLY IMAGINATION

And if we are to believe Mary's story, we must also change how we view God. We must think about a God who comes in a manger. We must think about the heavenly Word that becomes flesh ... helpless, vulnerable and dependent flesh.

That really does seem impossible. But, that is the promise of Christmas.

Have you ever noticed how imagination can play a negative role in our lives?

For example, a terrorist attack creates havoc, and we wonder when the next attack might occur. The economy takes a downturn, and we wonder if we too might lose our financial security.

We worry about the future. What is going to happen to our children? How will we care for our parents in their old age? Who will care for us?

Now, don't misunderstand. These are legitimate worries. But, sometimes our imagination gets the best of us. We worry about the future so much that we fail to find the blessings in the present.

The message of Christmas suggests that we use our imagination not as a medium for our destruction, but as a way to gather together in hope.

Instead of imagining the worst for the world, we imagine ourselves alongside Mary. We sing her song of praise and think about a world where God's will is done and God's kingdom comes. We imagine a world where young and old alike experience the joy of new life.

We picture the newborn child in our arms and remember that God has come to us as well. It is not just make believe. It is a way to believe. And through our holy imagination the Word becomes flesh in our own lives.

There's an ancient story about a man who was talking with a friend about his love life. The man said,

"I thought I had found the perfect woman. She was beautiful and had the most pleasing features a man could imagine. She was exceptional in every way, except she had no knowledge.

So, I traveled farther, and I met a woman who was both beautiful and intelligent. But, alas, we could not communicate. She spoke another language.

After further travels, I met a woman who had everything: a perfect mind, perfect intelligence, great beauty, and she spoke my language ... but ...”

The friend interrupted, “What happened? Why didn’t you marry her at once?”
And the man replied, “Ah, as luck would have it, she was looking for the perfect man.”

The good news of the gospel is this. God is looking for us. God sends His messenger of hope to us.

But, God is not looking for perfection. God chooses the ordinary. God loves the unlovable. In fact, God reverses just about every expectation we might have.

This is how God has chosen to enter the world and save it.

I want you to imagine this morning that the angel’s greeting to Mary is also the angel’s greeting to us. What would you do? How would you respond if the angel of the Lord came to you and said, “Greetings favored one. The Lord is with you.”

Well it has happened just that way.

The greeting of the angel was not just for Mary. It is for us as well.

And now is the time for us to ponder those words. As Paul put it, “If God is for us, who can be against us?”

Nothing is impossible for God, and God has chosen to become a part of our lives. Let us fall on our knees and once again hear the voices of the angels.

Amen.