

Mary's Joy

Whitefish UMC

Luke 1:26-39; Philippians 3:1-11

Third Sunday of Advent, December 13, 2009

- † The children have a way of presenting the Christmas story that invites us right into the middle of it. Amid the sweetness and joy of their pageant, it's easy to forget for a moment what came before the shepherds, the little town of Bethlehem, the wise men, and the manger.
- † Before all of that came something we call the Annunciation. Annunciation means "the announcement." Announcement sounds like such an ordinary word, doesn't it? It appears every Sunday in our bulletin—it's the time when we tell about all that's going on in church for the work of God's kingdom and the life of the church.
- † Announcement time is usually an occasion for an invitation. It's when you're invited to participate in ministries that offer healing, hope, and justice. Whether it's signing up to be a liturgist, ringing the Salvation Army bells, participating in the CROP Walk, becoming a Sunday school teacher—you're invited.
- † If all those announcements seem a little overwhelming sometimes, I invite you to consider with new vision and an open heart the Annunciation of the angel Gabriel to Mary so long ago.
- † Now that's an invitation, isn't it? I hope you know the story by heart: Mary, a young maiden who is from the hill country of Sepphora is minding her own business one night when she is visited by an angel. "Greetings favored one!" the angel says.

- † But when the angel announces that Mary is to become pregnant by the Holy Spirit and bear the Messiah, Mary might have been excused for thinking the first century equivalent of “With friends like these, who needs enemies?”
- † Nevertheless, after appropriately questioning the angel about the logistics of this amazing invitation, Mary does an astounding thing: she RSVP’s with a resounding “yes,” saying “Here I am, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.”
- † And then the angel leaves. Angela O’Donnell has written a wonderful poem about this moment:

["And the angel left her."](#)

So there she stood alone amid the stillness
as loud as any earthquake she had heard,
the eaves creaking in the absence of wind,
the hiss and tick of radiators warming
the house along with a soon-coming sun.
Her hands touch her belly, swelling already
like dough cupped close in an earthen bowl.
She knows it won't be long before she shows.
What to do with all this sudden silence?
Phone her boyfriend: *Joseph, I have news!*
E-mail St. Anne: *Dear mother, I'm afraid.*
Drop to her knees, now weak with recognition
and kiss the space he filled a moment past
in answer to the question he had asked.

- † The poet invites us to consider a contemporary setting for this ancient invitation. No ordinary announcement, this. Kathleen Norris, writing in her well-known book, Amazing Grace, warns against treating the Annunciation as anything but one of the essential mysteries of our faith.
- † Perhaps that's why the Annunciation is treated so frequently by poets, artists, storytellers, dramatists. It's a moment of such profound significance and an occasion for such wonder and awe that it is beyond conventional communication. And that is as it should be.
- † There's a great tendency among religious professionals to debate things like the Virgin Birth and to de-mythologize them. At one point I was intellectually curious about this ancient doctrine and enjoyed those arguments. Now I think they are only relevant if someone tries to say you have to believe in a literal interpretation of the Virgin Birth in order to be a true Christian.
- † (For the record, I don't think you have to ascribe authentic faith to an assertion of Mary's technical virginity to follow Jesus. Jesus never felt it was necessary, and He is my authority.)
- † But that's missing the point. And more importantly, it's neglecting the wonderful, amazing, holy, awe-inspiring invitation to participate in the mystery of God's being born again in and through you and me.
- † For there is only room for God to be born again in you and in me if we acknowledge that there needs to be a place that is untouched by our mundane preoccupations and desires, our need for self-fulfillment, in order for the angel to come to us with the invitation to participate in God's salvation of the world and of us.

- † Thomas Merton, the Trappist monk and mystic, describes the true identity that he seeks in contemplative prayer as a “point vierge” at the center of his being, “a point untouched by illusion, a point of truth...which belongs entirely to God, which is inaccessible to the fantasies of our own mind or the brutalities of own will.
- † This little point...of absolute poverty,” he wrote, “is the pure glory of God in us.” Kathleen Norris continues, “It is only when we stop idolizing the illusion of our control over the events of life and recognize our poverty that we become virgin in the sense that Merton means....”
- † Too often in our culture and faith, church has become all about therapy—self-fulfillment and realization. Stanley Hauerwas, the prophetic teacher at Duke Divinity School said in a recent *Christian Century*:
- † *The church has lost its ability to be a disciplined community because we’re now, religiously, in a buyer’s market. Christianity has to bill itself as very good for your self-realization, and that’s killing us because we’re not very good for your self-realization. We’re good for your salvation, which is not the same thing.*
- † And Mary knew that. She has a lot to teach us about what it means to admit our poverty and lowliness so that God can be born in and through us. For Mary, God’s invitation was to anything but self-fulfillment. Instead it was to an offer to participate in the salvation of humankind. Her Magnificat, her song, which she sings a few verses later and which we read responsively in our Canticle this morning, makes that clear.

- † “We all need to be told that God loves us, and the mystery of the Annunciation reveals an aspect of that love. But it also suggests that our response to this love is critical....” Mary’s response to the angel gives us clues. “How can this be?” reminds us that we can’t put God’s miracles into neatly tied packages of self-fulfillment.
- † Ironically, though, Mary’s joy comes not from any well-laid out plan for success and prosperity—anything but. It comes from being a part of something grand and mysterious and outrageously wonderful and significant—something beyond herself.
- † Holy fear and wonder characterize Mary’s joy. Mary proceeds, as we are invited to do also, by making her commitment without knowing much about what it will entail or where it will lead.
- † Kathleen Norris says it well: “I treasure the story because it forces me to ask: When the mystery of God’s love breaks through into my consciousness, do I run from it? Do I ask of it what it cannot answer?”
- † Shrugging, do I retreat into facile clichés, the popular but false wisdom of what ‘we all know’? Or am I virgin enough to respond from my deepest, truest self, and say something new, a ‘yes’ that will change me forever?”
- † Finally, I offer this invitation from Beverly Roberts Gaventa: *Mary is who we are. She is a person of faith who does not always understand but who seeks to put her trust in God. She is one who is blessed not because she sins less or has keener insights into the things of God.*
- † *She is instead blessed, as we are, because she is called by God to participate in the work of God...To call Mary blessed is to recognize the blessedness of ordinary people who are called to participate in that which is extraordinary.*

† This Advent, the Annunciation is for you: Greetings, favored one!
The Lord is with you. Don't be afraid. The Holy Spirit will come
upon you. For nothing is impossible with God.

† How will you RSVP? I pray it will be with Mary's joy. Amen.

Sources:

Kathleen Norris, Amazing Grace. 2001

Angela O'Donnell, "And the Angel Left Her." *Christian Century*,
December 1, 2009.

Beverly Roberts Gaventa, Blessed One: Protestant Perspectives on Mary.