

Sermon Advent IV, Year B, December 18, 2011

2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16

Canticle 3

Romans 16:25-27

Luke 1:26-38

The Rev. Bill Watson

The anticipation continues to build as we move along our Advent journey. Today we turn our focus from the prophetic call of John the Baptist to the annunciation to Mary. Our readings this morning want us to understand that this shocking, unexplainable, amazing event did not occur in a vacuum. It was part of the plan of God. As we heard from 2nd Samuel that plan, that covenant of God goes back a ways.

All the way back to King David and the promises made to the Hebrew people. In our OT lesson, David has built himself a fine palace of cedar, yet the holy tabernacle of God is portable and resides in a tent. David suggests building a permanent, fitting temple to house the tabernacle.

In response to David's offer, God has something else in mind. Instead of a temple, God will make a house of David, a heritage and royal lineage. Yahweh's promises to David begin by reminding David of his humble origins as a shepherd. As occurs often in scripture, God has a preference for the poor, powerless and humble. Time and again God raises them to power and greatness in his service. God reminds David of the success and peace that he is enjoying as a result of God's presence and guidance. David's people likewise enjoy peace as well.

Above all, God promises David that his family will be established forever, an eternal royal house. Finally, David's son shall also be God's son. "I will be a father to him, and he shall be a son to me." This creates the expectation of the people of Israel for one who would come as a descendant of David. Over time this expectation grew into the hope for the messiah of the people of God. This anticipation had been building for over 800 years as all Israel had been looking forward to the one who is the David to come.

The people of Israel held onto this expectation for generations. Into that sense of anticipation the storyteller and gospel writer Luke enters. Luke is first and foremost a storyteller and he has given us a wonderful story in the annunciation.

In the midst of all that is happening in our busy lives and in Mary's life an angel appears. Like the knock at the door when we are already frantic with activity, just what we needed, the angel appears. But that is the story of scripture and of God's relationship with us. In the stories of faith, God enters the lives of ordinary people and invites them on a journey. There is not a single story in all of scripture of an angel or a prophet appearing and announcing a message of "stay the course." God always comes with a message of surprise, of amazement, of new possibilities. The stories today are filled with the grace of God coming into unlikely circumstances in unpredictable ways and always with great power.

Make no mistake, the angel's arrival into Mary's life was shocking. Her initial reaction was one of fear and concern. The text says she was perplexed, and Gabriel addressed her fear. "Do not be afraid." "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God." And then the preposterous plan is revealed.

We can almost hear Mary's response, "say what?" no, that's not what she said, "how can this be?" We can certainly understand where Mary is coming from. But just because it sounds impossible to our ears does not mean that it may not be a part of God's plan. So Gabriel goes on to share the details. And concludes by saying, "'For nothing will be impossible with God.'"

Our lesson does not suggest it but I believe there must have been a pause. Luke doesn't give any of the details at this point. We know well the familiar story and we too seem to hold our breath as we await Mary's response. Will Mary say yes to the divine initiative? We wait and hope as all of heaven waited and hoped that fateful day. It is said that all the angels of heaven were silent and watching as Mary reflected and considered her response.

She could have answered in a variety of ways, ways that are very familiar to us. She might have said, “Actually, I’m engaged to a wonderful man and we have plans for children of our own.” Or, “this is really not a convenient time; there is a lot on my plate right now.” Or, “I’m overwhelmed; I couldn’t possibly take on one more thing.” “I’m sorry I can’t say yes.”

In the National Sculpture Garden at the Smithsonian in Washington, there is a wonderful sculpture of this scene by Jacob Epstein. Epstein’s “The Visitation,” is dramatically different from all those romantic Renaissance portrayals. You know the familiar famous paintings. There is light shining in through a window illuminating the angel Gabriel who has a regal appearance. Mary is dressed in a royal blue regal gown. The angelic visitor seems almost natural and expected.

Epstein’s bronze Mary on the other hand is a thin woman with hands outstretched and a look of dread and anxiety. As if to say, “What are you asking me to do?”

I don’t know about your experience but I have not been addressed by angels. But I have heard God’s call in my life through friends and co-workers. I think that many times God does not want to shock us and so the divine idea is presented by those closest to us perhaps.

Scripture is filled with the stories of God’s word coming in a dream or a vision or with an angel or human messenger. We believe God remains in relationship with us always revealing his desire and hope in our lives. Sometimes that word can even come in a new idea or image or daydream. Sometimes it comes through a request made by a friend. Scripture is filled with the myriad ways that God communicates with us. That is why we like Mary must pause and reflect when we are presented with a seemingly impossible task. When someone asks us to do something we must prayerfully consider the request because it just may be God’s request. We must be slow to say no, because discerning God’s will is usually not straightforward, simple or without fear.

The writer Kathy Staudt asks, “Aren’t there annunciations in most lives?” Ordinary lives interrupted by the sacred word or vision. God speaks an idea, a hope, a dream. But unlike Mary we don’t pause to reflect or consider them. We turn aside, continuing on our way, our busy way. When we do the image fades and doors close and lives continue undisturbed.

Even in our lives God will come bearing the gift of faith. If not into a mansion as our collect suggests then perhaps in some far neglected cluttered corner of our lives. There in the unlikeliest of places God will come. Interrupting our lives and all our plans with God’s plans. Impossible, unlikely plans involving the unlikeliest of persons, folks like you and me. Never doubt that you have a role to play in this divine drama that we call life. Even in our lives, nothing is too wonderful for God, “nothing will be impossible with God.”

Advent reminds us that our God is a God of promise, of covenanted relationship. God keeps his promises, sometimes in the most surprising of ways. All of scripture points to the amazing presence and work of God throughout time, demonstrating over and over that “nothing will be impossible with God.” God remains in relationship with us whether we are faithful or not. That is what covenant means, an unbreakable relationship that God has committed to. And God is working his purposes out in surprising and unexpected ways. Scripture shows us the hand of God at work, what OT scholar Elizabeth Achtemeier calls, “the slender thread of God’s working.”

That work continues in our day as well. Continues in the hope that God has for each of our lives. The hope that we too will say yes to God’s initiative. We may not experience the drama of a visit by the angel Gabriel, but each of us has a critical part to play in bringing in the kingdom of God. Our lives too are a vital part of the “slender thread of God’s working.”(Achtemeier).

God’s continuing work, bringing in the kingdom depends on us, just as it depended on Mary.

Thankfully, Mary responded by saying, “Yes.” “Here I am, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” What faith!

Mary’s yes was the first response to God’s plan for a completely new beginning in God’s relationship with his beloved people. Mary agrees to do the unthinkable. No wonder she sets off at once to her kinswoman

Elizabeth. Perhaps she goes to see if what the angel has said is true and can be believed. When she arrives she discovers that Elizabeth is indeed with child even at her old age. Mary then sings out her joy in her Magnificat that we read (sung) as our gradual this morning. The slender thread of God's working was dependent upon Mary's yes long ago. And through her faithfulness Mary bore the divine hope, Emmanuel, God with us.

God continues to speak in our day as well. Advent calls us to listen, to wait, and to hope. For we never know when God's call may interrupt our lives. "For nothing will be impossible with God."