

Advent 4 - Luke 1:26-56 (Birth of Jesus Foretold)

The announcement of new birth is exciting in most settings in human history. It reminds us of the significance of newness, new hopes, and new dreams, and even the possibility of making a difference in the world. Birth also signifies change. It alters the makeup of families and relationships. Commitments must be re-conceived. The announcement of Jesus' birth is the beginning of a new age.

Luke situates the story between the pronouncement of John the Baptist's birth and the description of John's actual birth later in the chapter. As central as John and Jesus are to Luke's narrative, their parents are the subjects of the opening chapter. Gabriel, God's angel, appears first to Zechariah to announce John's birth, then to Mary to announce Jesus' birth.

Today, on this fourth Sunday of Advent, our eyes turn to the call of Mary of Nazareth and her calling to us. Her response to God and her hymn of praise, ring out through the ages and serve as a model for our own spiritual journeys.

Mary's response to Gabriel is as much about fidelity as physiology. The nativity story begins with a surprising angelic visit to an apparently ordinary young woman, on the verge of marriage. There is no hint that she is sinless or immune from the fluctuations of human life. There is nothing in the gospel account that would point to her uniqueness metaphysically or prenatally. She was the child of mortals who shared in the challenges and ambiguities of mortality. Though called by God, to be the mother of God's saviour, she is also "every woman" or "every person." We are also called by God in challenging times, to give birth to God's new age.

However, the same old, mythical, patriarchal stories about Mary keep slipping over pulpits and out of parish news letters, Christmas cards, and TV movies. The church has often had a difficult time knowing just what to make of Mary. In certain times and places, she has been exalted to a status approaching that of deity, such that some medieval theologians even began to speak of a Quaternity rather than a Trinity.

In sharp contrast to such excesses, Protestants have taken the treatment of Mary as deity, to the other extreme, totally ignoring Mary's role in the drama of salvation history. There are many Protestant churches named St. Mark's, St. Luke's, St. James' and St. Stephen's, but very few named St. Mary's - though by any objective analysis, Mary plays a far more important role in biblical accounts than Mark, James, Stephen, or Luke.

Still, Mary's memory is cherished by both extreme approaches, especially around Christmas. For many she is a model of motherhood. Recently, she has been valued more generically as a woman. Sometimes she becomes a role model for feminist identification: Mary, is her own person, unexploited; her identity is not given to her by any male, but is her own, a gift from God. The subjugation of Mary, the maligning of her as meek, mild, and mindless, has been harmful to millions of women over many centuries.

Hidden within the wonder of Christmas is more than a thousand years of doctrinal female subjugation, doctrines that, like tinsel, are scattered all over the Christmas season - repressive concepts that keep women from feeling empowered, from being invited to be strong, and urged by God to imagine new ways to live, as Mary of Nazareth did, who mothered God's redemption of the human world.

Luke is the only gospel in which Mary's story appears, and in his account there is nothing submissive nor immature about her. According to Luke, the angel approached her with words of great honour: Hail Mary, full of grace. Many artists paint the angel kneeling in recognition of the honour given to her. The angel is explicit; the honour is for the grace that is distinctly hers. This is a courtship scene. The angel is wooing her on bended knee, a suitor - not a constable bringing a decree.

It is Mary's grace that has attracted God's attention. And what is this grace? It is what Luke reveals to us in her conversation and her actions - courage, boldness, grit, ringing convictions about justice - not submissive meekness. Grace is not submission. And the power of God is never meek.

Yes, she is startled by the presence of the angel. So were Gideon, Jacob, Jonah, Daniel, and the shepherds of Bethlehem. They, like Mary, questioned the angel in wonder, doubt, and even resistance. They are all noted for their reluctance. Why not Mary? "What sort of greeting is this?" she asked. And the Angel accommodated her with an explanation.

To say Mary is perplexed by her angelic visitor is an understatement. Think for a moment how you might feel if you were the recipient of an angelic request of any kind, not to mention an unexpected pregnancy. "How shall this happen to me, when I have no husband?" Mary challenges the angel. God chose a spunky woman. We might say the same thing if we had received an unexpected spiritual announcement, and were called from our comfort zone to a new adventure. Am I the only one to say "yes" to God's calling? Does God really want me to take this step?

Many women in biblical stories appear in domestic settings. Sarah is in her tent, baking cakes. Rachel is drawing water at the well. Bathsheba is taking a bath. Martha is fussing around in the kitchen. The woman who lost a coin is sweeping the house. But with Mary, there is no evidence of any domestic work on her part. We never find her cooking, cleaning, or washing up. The evidence offered us is her love of adventure. What we find her doing, over and over, is travelling, in journeys that involve risks and an element of danger.

Her recitation of the Magnificat is a political manifesto, delivered fairly publicly, in the home of an official temple priest, who is married to her cousin Elizabeth, who is also pregnant, with John the Baptist. In Mary's manifesto, there is evidence of deep thought, strong conviction, a good deal of political savvy and even theological knowledge, as she uses words similar to those of Isaiah and other prophets.

None of this jives with the idea that she is a young teenage girl. The Greek word Luke uses for "virgin" is an unusual one, a very specific word that means "she has not yet born a child." Its precise meaning does not indicate sexual innocence. So, to be clear, the focus here is strictly on her womb. The state of virginity as we know it - is not at issue here.

Luke does not assign her a specific age. And to insist she is thirteen or fourteen or under sixteen twists Mary's story and burdens Christian women with a sense of selfishness if they postpone childbearing, a psychic demand to put childbearing first in their hearts, for God who seems to want nothing from them but pregnancy and childbearing.

Mary is unmarried, although betrothed, when the angel comes. The angel's invitation and her independent decision tell us Mary does not need permission of clergy - or her parents - to

become pregnant. God knows Mary owns her own body. And there is no shame in her decision. Mary is good news for unwed mothers everywhere.

Mary's uniqueness is not her perfection, but her willingness to say "yes" to the unexpected and apparently impossible. She aligns her will with God's will, and miracles that occur; for with God, nothing is impossible. What we deem impossible may be part of God's deeper reality breaking forth into our lives.

The miracle here is saying "yes" to God. But, notice one important thing: before Mary says "yes," she is blessed. This captures not only the important role Mary plays in the Gospel story but also reveals a central dynamic of the Christian life. Blessing is a powerful thing - and sadly, a rare thing. Our world seems geared toward rewards and punishments. We expect people to give us only what we deserve. But, blessing operates on a different logic. Blessing is never deserved, but always a gift. Blessing intrudes into, interrupts, and ultimately disrupts our quid pro quo world to announce that someone sees us as worthy and special apart from anything we've done.

Mary is perplexed by the angel's announcement that she is blessed and favoured by God. "What have I done," Mary may wonder, "to merit God's notice and favour." But that is what a blessing is - unmerited and undeserved regard and favour. And as the blessing sinks in, Mary is able to open herself to the work of the Holy Spirit to use her to bless the whole world through her willingness to carry Jesus.

We have a hard time believing that God favours us or at times, even notices us. On Sunday, in church - yes - maybe. But what about Monday and Tuesday and the rest of the week? Does God notice us? Yet, in this story, God notices and blesses someone who by all accounts is a nobody in the ancient world, even though she is spunky. When this nobody girl believes God's blessing and accepts God's favour, the world begins to turn. When we say "yes" to God's ways, the world is transformed.

Yet, we often choose to say "no" to God's ways and continue to perpetuate the growing distance between the rich and the poor, unjust distribution of the world's resources, and the destruction of the earth and its ecosystems.

Mary's miracle vision appears impossible to us. At first glance, Christmas can't change our greed and self-interest and our neglect of the vulnerable and marginalised. Yet, according to Gabriel, with God nothing is impossible. The impossible possibility is that we will embrace God's vision, follow God's vision, and live on earth as it is in heaven.

Mary's willingness to say "yes" and then act upon her affirmation inspires us to be agents in God's adventure. Mary is an example of what can happen, when you believe that God notices, favours, and blesses you: you just may change the world. God presents possibilities for new birth and we are called to carry the possibilities to term and nurture them in our rough and tumble world. Mary's "yes" opens the door for unimaginable adventures for herself and our world. She gives birth to God's novel vision and opens the door for the coming Christ.

Let us be open to angelic visitors and in all of our unpreparedness be willing to say "yes" for God's dream taking birth in our own lives and congregations. Actually, all of us are God's favoured ones called and commissioned to hear, believe, and respond to God's blessing wherever we are.

Mary, wanted by God, according to the angel, for her bold, independent, adventuresome spirit, decides to bear a holy child - for a bold agenda: to bring the mighty down from their thrones; to scatter the proud in the imagination of their hearts; to fill the hungry with good things and send the rich away empty. This is Mary: well-spoken, wise, gritty.

Travelling alone, like every prophet before her, she sets out on her first journey, to her cousin Elizabeth's house, to declare her agenda. There will be more journeys: to Bethlehem; to Egypt and back; to Jerusalem when Jesus is twelve; to Jerusalem when he is crucified.

She is determined, not domestic; free, not foolish; holy, not helpless; strong, not submissive. She beckons women everywhere, and all of us to speak out for God's justice which is waiting to be born into this world.

Imagine where you will go this week, what you will do, whom you will meet, and how God is noticing you and blessing you so you might be a blessing to the world. We are all called to be mothers of God - for God is always waiting to be born into our world, to give birth to justice on earth as it is in heaven. Amen.