

“Mary’s First Prayer”

Valley Presbyterian Church – December 21, 2008

4th Sunday of Advent

Psalm 89:1-4, 13-16

Rev. John Wahl

Luke 1:26-28

The old-fashioned word we use to describe this Sunday, when we read the story of the angel Gabriel’s announcement is “Annunciation.” This is when Mary is informed that she is blessed among women, and that she is going to have a baby, that his name is to be *Emmanuel*: God with us. But the first thing Gabriel said to Mary was that she had been favored – chosen – and that “the Lord is with you.”

We all know that Mary seemed an unlikely candidate to play such a prominent role in the transmission of God’s word and will into the world. We know that Mary was merely a teenager; that as an engaged “young woman” she would become vulnerable to social criticism for showing up pregnant.

We also know that Mary lived in the town of Nazareth in Galilee. For Luke, this location was important; not just because it was far away from Jerusalem: the center of the Jewish faith; and not just because of the Old Testament prophecy which had foretold that the messiah would be “a Nazarene.” Galilee was a sort of a melting pot society: a place where Jewish and Gentile people lived alongside one another in relative peace. Planting Jesus’ origins in Galilee anticipates the emphasis that this author of Luke and Acts will place on the Gentile mission and the reunion of human community.¹

And so, Luke literally characterizes the nativity story to be unexpected and out-of-the-way. All the while, it serves to fulfill the Old Testament vision expressed through Abraham and Isaiah that the people of Israel would serve as a light to the nations; that the coming messiah would offer salvation not only to a few, but to everyone.

“The Holy Spirit will come upon you,” the angel Gabriel said to Mary. Only when describing a point before the announcement of salvation history, before time began, and before anything existed, does the Bible use similar language:

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void and darkness was on the face of the deep; and the spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters [Gen. 1:1-2].

As God’s Spirit moved over the void before it was filled with the heavens and the earth, so that same Spirit overshadowed Mary and placed within her God’s own Son. As the theological icon Karl Barth has stressed, human initiative (and particularly that of any human male) is excluded in the nativity. There is no conception at all: only *creation*.

¹ Ronald Allen in *Lectionary Homiletics*, Dec. 2008.

We refer to this scene by using the big word “Annunciation” but what we really mean to say is call. Gabriel told Mary that she was “blessed among women,” and that she would become “full of grace” because God was calling her. For whatever reasons that we could guess but never fully know, God had chosen her to become the agent of God’s redemptive grace.

We know that the Bible is full of calls to particular people which take place in seemingly strange circumstances. Some, like Jeremiah or Mary, seem too young; others like Abraham and Sarah consider themselves too old. Some, like Moses, think they are inadequately prepared; others, as with Paul, consider themselves damaged goods.

But, we don’t have to look so far back in history to find such examples of God calling people to extraordinary service. You need only ask someone why they became a nurse or a teacher or a social worker; why they volunteer with rescue animals or driving for Meals-on-Wheels or building houses with Habitat for Humanity. These individuals all have call stories – they may not have been as sudden or dramatic as we see in the Annunciation of Mary, but they show the Spirit of God’s creation nonetheless.

Seminaries and divinity schools ought to be – and indeed are – full of stories from ordinary people: old and young, experienced and naïve, overtly flawed and seemingly unprepared. When I try to tell my particular call story – both to myself and to others – and answer the questions of when and how and why, it sounds neither very sudden nor dramatic. The announcement came to me through many voices – none of them looking or sounding particularly angelic – over a long period of time. Whereas Mary asked one question – “how can this be?” – then responded “yes!”, I spent years saying a number of things including: “I’m not ready; I’m not interested; I’m not a good choice,” and “I’m not even listening.” For a while, I found myself saying to God, “okay, I’ll be your servant, but I don’t want to be a minister; I don’t want to be your mouthpiece.”

Finally, after my particular time of wrestling with God – not as long as some, but longer than others – I prayed what in essence is Mary’s first prayer. Not the prayer that we heard last week – the *Magnificat* – where she praises God for empowering those with no power and raising up the poor and bringing low the rich. Instead, Mary’s first prayer is about saying “yes!” – yes to her calling, yes to God’s purposes, yes to whenever and however and wherever God will place us. “Here am I,” Mary said, echoing her ancestors in the faith, “the servant of the Lord, let it be with me according to your word.”

As individuals, we are the ones who – when called – have the opportunity to say “yes!” but the announcements we receive happen in the context of community: families, friends, schools and churches. Annunciations come to us in peculiar times and places: to be a servant of the Lord can mean many different things. And yet it is always according to God’s word, God’s promise, which Gabriel made known to Mary and which we can and must make known to one another: that “nothing will be impossible with God.”

Bishop William Willimon, former dean at Duke Divinity School and currently a Methodist bishop in Mississippi, shares how he required his first-year seminary students to write about their sense of call – much like I was required to do:

One of my most favorite stories of call, Willimon says, was the student who wrote that during his teenage years, “I was the teenager from hell.” 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. Eventually, 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 met with his parents and told them the story of the surprising turn of events, that, though his life had been a tortured series of mistakes and accumulated irresponsibility, he now believed that God wanted him to become a pastor. Suddenly, his mother burst into tears, saying, “I’m so ashamed! I can’t believe this has happened!”

The son was troubled 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 promised God that if he would let me have a baby, that I could bring to term, and if it were a boy I would name him Samuel and would dedicate him to God, just like Hannah did back in the Old Testament.”

Sam, this young man contemplating God’s call, heard this with 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 Methodists,” 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. How was I to know that it would work?”²

This Annunciation from the Angel Gabriel is not worded as a proposal but as an exercise of irresistible power: "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you." Mary may be “favored among women,” but she is also just a scared teenager who doesn’t seem to have had much choice in the matter.

But the announcement from the Angel concludes with this first prayer of Mary when she offers her assent to God’s calling. And because she responds, saying to God,

² William Willimon, “The Lord is With You”, Dec. 19, 1999.

“let it be with me according to your word,” the story now hinges on her participation in the drama. She has become a willing participant in the creation of something powerful and new for God – even if she has done nothing more than believe.

Mary’s call was unique. Nobody before or since has been called to do what Mary did. She was called to be the mother of Jesus, Emmanuel, God with us. Thus she is called – in some parts of the Church – the theotokos, “the God bearer.” Mary bears God into the world through her willingness to believe that she is to be the mother of Jesus.

And yet, I can’t hear the story of Mary’s call, without thinking of my own. Our encounters with God often show a similar pattern as Mary’s. There are accompanying feelings of un-preparedness, unknowing, confusion, and fear. Although the voices might be known to us, the call comes to us “from above.” Not of our own devising. It is not something that we thought of or planned. Rather it is something that God gives to us.

If Mary is an inspiration to only women, or to those who are faced all-of-a-sudden with one of life’s curveballs, or to the ancients, or to innocents, or for peasants, then we are selling the story of the Annunciation short. Mary’s example is to all of us; and her prayer is a fitting response to God’s call for each of us to make when it is announced to us: “Here I am, the servant of the Lord, let it be with me according to your word.”

Friends, hear and believe the word that Mary heard: “for, nothing is impossible with God.” AMEN.