

December 24, 2017

(Luke 1: 26 - 38)

In the Name of the Living God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

“And he came to her and said, ‘Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.’” Just imagine it for a moment, if indeed it is possible to imagine such a thing. Ponder the background of this passage for a moment.

Today, even with modern scholarship and technological advances in fields such as anthropology and archeology, there is much yet to learn about ancient Israel. But, one of the certainties we do know is that the social, political, and...always first...the religious order...were absolutely and clearly patriarchal. In other words, it was a man’s world, to be sure.

So, as a result, the normal expectation and anticipation at that time, for when God came a’callin’, was that the receiver of the message was going to be male. Of course, when the subject was about being a child bearer, a female is the more natural choice. But, in the context of the time and place, 2,000 years ago, should not that female be at least a somebody?

Guess not. Here she is and, by all accounts of standardized measurement, she is a wonderfully ordinary person....the daughter of peasants, a poor shepherd and his wife, who likely love their daughter but, in the middle of the night, lying awake, silently give thanks to God that a promising young man wants to marry her and will take her away from their table. Remember, this is 2,000 years ago...so foreign to our understanding now and our experience.

Yet, like her contemporaries, outside of marriage, she has no good future...no formal education, no virtuous marketable skills, no reason to suspect that she will be extraordinary at all. But, again, here she is. A thirteen-year-old girl...fifteen, tops...confronted by an angel, for goodness sake...saying God has chosen her.

Put yourself in her place...then and there, not here and now. What would *we* say to such a startling announcement? What would *you* do?

When faced with an unexpected, unsolicited and, often, undesirable situation, what does it mean to respond in faith? A good place to start in trying to figure out what constitutes a faithful response to the unexpected turns of life is to believe that, somehow, some way, there is a connection between what happens to us and how God is at work in our lives and in the world.

Let yourself question and wonder about this. Does the Holy Spirit tell your heart that, in life, things just happen, or is there some overall plan at work here in which everything finally comes together...for the good?

When the angel appeared to Mary, what did she do? She did not run away, or ask him to leave

her alone. She did not ignore him or what he said, nor did she call the equivalent of our police....she did not dial 911, if you will. Instead, she listened and tried to understand the meaning of it all.

She was told that she was going to be pregnant. In that time and in that society, given that she was betrothed only and not yet married, it was virtually a death sentence for her. The penalty was death by stoning. Her personal risk was incredible. But, her faithful response was not to lash out in anger, or strike back in rebellion when the news did not go her way...according to her plan or her schedule...but Luke says that she pondered what sort of greeting this might be. In other words, she paused to consider what God was up to, and how God might use a circumstance unforeseen by her and use it to bless her and strengthen her in faith.

Is not that the continuing and living real miracle of this story? Should we not refocus on how this gospel message lives for us...and for others in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? When we completely focus on the story of the virgin birth miracle itself, we Christians today argue with non-believers over a one-time-only historical event, using language and understanding as different as apples and oranges. One side attempts to proclaim through faith in divine action, while the other side rejects that proclamation based on a non-parallel, modern clinical understanding of basic pro-creation biology. No one wins that discussion...most certainly those Christians who know the living God.

No, by focusing another way, this is really a wonderful opportunity to tell the gospel to those yet to hear it. This story of Mary and Gabriel is not an ancient historical tale...of little more meaning to you and me today than, let's say, the sinking of the Titanic. No, the living and continuing miracle of this story...as we proclaim and live the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ as the church of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, is touched upon by the noted Episcopal priest and author Barbara Taylor, who writes: "Mary wins her place in history not for her cleverness, nor for her beauty, nor even for her goodness. She becomes the most important woman in the world simply because she is willing to say yes to an angels' strange proposal without a clue where it will lead her. In doing so, she becomes the prototype for all of us who are invited to bear God into the world."

Hear that again: She is the prototype for all of us who are invited to bear God into the world. Of all the world's great faith traditions, this is the only where God comes to us in the form of a human baby. It is no wonder, therefore, that today, we light the Angel's candle in Advent, the candle that symbolizes the LOVE that brings Jesus to us. That a very young and simple, Jewish peasant girl...without education, without pedigree, without stature...but also without warning, without safety, without self-control, responds willingly. She responds, through faith, out of humility and trust in the providence of God....allowing her to be lead to a different life, for herself, and for each of us thereafter....all to, and by, and for the love of God, known to us this day as the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.