

GOSPEL READING: Luke 1:26-38 The announcement to Mary

SERMON

We call it “annunciation,” this Sunday when we read the story of the angel Gabriel’s announcement to Mary that she was blessed among women, that she was going to have a baby, that his name would be Emmanuel, God with us.

But the first thing Gabriel announced to Mary was this — “The Lord is with you.”

We refer to this scene by the big Bible word “Annunciation” but what we really mean is call. On that day the angel Gabriel told Mary that she was “blessed among women” because God was calling her.

The Bible is full of this sort of thing. Here is somebody minding his or her own business, and then, as if from out of nowhere, there comes a call. The person is often startled to be called by God. Therefore, Gabriel says to Mary, “Do not be afraid.” Usually the person who is the recipient of the call asks questions. Mary asked, “How can this be?”

And who can blame her for asking? She is not even yet married to Joseph. She is engaged. She is a young woman without any particular education or preparation, so far as we know. How can this be?

Of course, anybody receiving a call from God would likely ask a similar question. How can this be? Why would you choose me?

When, Mary accepts the call. She says, “Let it be to me according to your word.” Isaiah, on a similar occasion responded with a perhaps more enthusiastic “Here am I, send me.” (Isa. 6).

When Abraham got the call on a starry night, even though he was a very old man, he was almost too dumbfounded to speak, probably because he was a very old man. His wife Sarah, when she got the call, burst out laughing.

As for Mary, she simply said, Yes.

As I said, you get these calls, these annunciations throughout scripture. You also get them today.

That is right. Maybe you think the sort of thing that happened to Mary happened once and only to her. But the Bible teaches that God seems to be in the call business. Even today. A lecturer at a Theological College got his students to write an essay, “My Call to the Ordained Ministry.” Some of the essays were very strange. They told about visions from God in the middle of the night, when they least expect it. They were about lives that were tossed and tormented until they finally realized that they are being called, until they finally summon up the courage to say, “Yes.” Here I am, send me. Some of them wrote of rather calm and ordered accounts, about a gradual awareness that God had something for them to do.

One woman said that she had been married for about fifteen years to a minister. One afternoon she was sitting on the sofa in the manse, smoking a cigarette, drinking a beer, and reading some trashy supermarket checkout line novel. Her husband walked in, the minister, and said something to her like, “You sure don’t look like a minister’s wife.”

With that, she stomped out the cigarette, threw down her novel and shouted out, “I’m a wife, but not a minister.”

She meant it as a way of telling her husband to back off. But she said that as soon as the words came out of her mouth, “I am not a minister,” she said it was like this voice in her brain which said, “How do you know you are not called to be a minister?”

A voice, just like that. She said the thing started working on her brain over the next few days. After a period of over a year of struggle with the idea, she candidated to become a minister.

One student wrote that during his teenage years, “I was the teenager from hell.” He made his parents’ lives utterly miserable. He was so irresponsible, he failed University, and spent a couple of years working. While working, he met a woman and married. 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 University. 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, the way that, though his life had been a tortured series of mistakes and accumulated irresponsibility, he now believed that God wanted him to become a minister.

Suddenly, his mother burst into tears, saying, “I’m so ashamed! I can’t believe this has happened!”

He 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, 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.”

Her son heard all of this with great 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?”

If you think the story of Mary, being called by the angel Gabriel is strange, think again. Stories of annunciation, of vocation, of call, tend to be strange. They are not strange because God sends an angel to call someone, though sometimes God does, rather, they are strange because the one being called is us. Like Mary, we think of all of the reasons why this doesn’t make any sense. We are not perfect people. We have baggage. We have limitations. Nevertheless, in our better moments, when the call comes, we, like Mary, simply say “Yes.”

This appears to be the primary way God changes the world. Through annunciation, through call and vocation. God changes the course of history, not through earthquake, wind and fire, but through ordinary people like Mary who get called. Furthermore, ordinary people who say Yes.

You recall those beautiful paintings that show an elegant angel giving the annunciation to a beautifully dressed Mary. Usually Mary is depicted as drawing back in fear. She must have been in fear, for why else would Gabriel have told her not to fear?

Usually in these paintings, there is a dove, hovering just over Gabriel and Mary. That dove is a symbol of the Holy Spirit. That dove is a reminder that this whole thing is God's idea before it is our idea. This whole annunciation thing is an announcement from God that comes to us, as if from above, on the wings of a snow-white dove.

But the story of Mary also reminds us that, though the action is initiated from God, it is still a two-way street. Somebody has got to receive the announcement, somebody has got to hear the call and respond, yes. Thus the story of Mary is a strange event, with the angel Gabriel sweeping into Mary's life. This thing is from God. From above.

But it is also from below. That is, it is a perfectly understandable and believable story about a young woman who, to her surprise, is caught up in the purposes of God. Therefore, it is the story about her very human confusion and fear. But it is also a story about Mary's saying, "Yes." I don't know how all of this will happen, but use me as you will.

I know, I know. 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 God, the mother of Jesus. Thus she is called in the Eastern Church the theotokos, "the God bearer." Mary bears God into the world in being willing to be the mother of Jesus.

And yet, you can't hear the story of Mary's call, without thinking of your own. Our encounters with God often show some of the same pattern as Mary's. There is unknowing, confusion, and, yes, fear. 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.

And yet at the same time we, like Mary, still have some say-so in the matter. We must say, Yes. Mary could have said No. We could say no. We can say "No thank you God, I am quite happy with my life the way it is. My life may be proceeding in some rather unimaginative ruts, but at least they are my ruts. I may be living only for myself and my projects, but at least they are mine. I'm not so sure that I want to have my life caught up in anything much larger than my life."

You can say all of that when the call comes, and all of that is perfectly understandable.

But, like Mary, you can also say yes, and that can make all the difference.

There are few things more sad than an uncalled life. Vocation, like the one Mary received, is not only confusing and sometimes frightening, but it can be exciting, invigorating. It can be a great gift for God to choose you for some work of godly purpose. It can be a great gift to have your life caught up in something more significant than just your life. Thus, Mary had the faith to see that, what the angel Gabriel was offering her, in calling her for God, was not only a bit disturbing and frightening, but it was also a great gift. And that is why she said yes. And that is why to this day we still call her "blessed among women."

Throughout the centuries the church called Mary the very first of the disciples. She is the first person in the story of Jesus to have her life caught up in God's great project of Incarnation. She was the first one to hear the call and say yes.

If we had the time today, it would be fun to hear the story of your annunciation. As your minister, I am sure that there are plenty of people here who have received a call. Somebody else, looking at your life, might say, "Isn't it interesting how she could have done almost

anything with her life, anything that she wanted to. And yet she decided to be a nurse. She decided to care for people, even though she would not make a lot of money.”

Or they might say, “I find it interesting that, when some people might be spending their retirement time on the golf course, he spends most of his time helping out in running English Classes. I wonder how he decided to do that?”

Of course, through the eyes of faith, to those of us in the know, we know by heart the story of Mary’s annunciation. We describe such circumstances, not as something that we decided, something that we chose, but rather as a task that was given by God. A call, an annunciation that our little lives were being caught up for significant purposes than simply our lives.

The greatest gift, of being called, of living a life that has been summoned, is summed up in the very first words that the angel Gabriel said to Mary. He called her a “favoured one.” Why? Because, as he went on to say, “The Lord is with you.” You are not alone. The gifts you have been given are gifts to be used for vocation. Your little life is about to count for something larger than your life.

This is one of the great messages of Christmas. The Lord is with you. And you, and you, and you. Amen.