

Our Luke text for today, this fourth Sunday in Advent, is the account of the angel Gabriel bringing the surprising and fearful announcement to Mary that she will have a baby. This baby shall rule from the throne of David.

Don't be put off by the angel Gabriel. Don't brush the story off because of an asked for literal acceptance of the scripture. I know the early Protestant Reformers complained about Mary and the intercession of the saints. At the time of the Reformation, it was common for people to not pray directly to God, but through a saint – and if you are into that, Mary, the Queen of Heaven, would be a good choice. Put all that fundamentalist literal interpretation, all those ideas you have about angels and such down for a few minutes and just listen to the story.

Mary. Most scholars think she was a young peasant girl, maybe as young as 13. Mary is this young girl who is one day addressed by God. She is just out minding her own business. Here comes this call. The text says, "Mary is perplexed by this call." And she should be. There is going to be a radical change in her life. Maybe she is wondering about her standing in the community. She has this very proper engagement, and it is going to be questioned. This is not good. An unwed, pregnant girl. The community is not going to accept this. It is just not the way things are. And how is Joseph going to take this news? Is he really going to believe this "over shadowing of the Holy Spirit" stuff? Mary is perplexed and she is wondering what sort of greeting this might be.

And another thing – this baby. What brings more change into a family than the arrival of a baby? A baby has a way of disrupting the way things are. Barrett and Miriam Taylor – our members over in Athens, Georgia went home to Austin for Thanksgiving. There was to be a baby shower for their baby expected this spring. Barrett sent me an e-mail lamenting the fact that he really wanted to watch the Texas Longhorns football game against Texas Tech. It is not that he did not want to be at the baby shower. It was just that the time of the shower and the time of the game coincided. I didn't want to scare Barrett, but I did e-mail back that this would not be the last time that the baby would change his priorities. Babies change our way of living – and if you are the night parent – well, things change.

Mary is perplexed at this announcement and she should be.

I look at this story as a call story. A call from God for Mary to be a part of what God is doing in the world.

We are familiar with call stories in the bible. God calls to Abraham and Sarah – "Time for you to leave your family. Time for you to go out to a place I will send you. Time for this new community – The People of God." God calls Abraham and Sarah to begin this creation of his people. And God says the same words God has Gabriel say to Mary in our text for today. "Fear not, Abraham and Sarah. Fear not. For I will be with you."

Moses is out tending his father-in-law's sheep. His father-in-law is Jethro, the Priest of Median. Moses is tending the sheep. This voice speaks to Moses out of a burning bush that will not be consumed. "Moses, I want you to go back to Egypt and tell Pharaoh to set my people free."

"You want me to do what? I am a wanted man back in Egypt. I can't do that. Why, I can't even talk well. You get Aaron."

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PILGRIM C H U R C H

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And God says to Moses the same words that God says to Mary in our text for today. "Moses. Fear not. I will be with you."

God calls to Jonah. "Jonah, I want you to go to Nineveh. I want you to preach to the people in that city. Jonah says, "You want me to do what?" Jonah does not want to preach to the people in Nineveh. They are enemies of his people and he wants nothing to do with them. You know the story of Jonah trying to flee. He thought if he could get out of the territory that he thought God ruled, then God could not make him go. The book of Jonah is not just the story of a big fish, it is the understanding that God also loves the people that Jonah has deemed unacceptable. And after the fish episode, Jonah goes to Nineveh. And God says to Jonah the same thing God says to Mary, "Fear not, Jonah. I will be with you."

This story in Luke for today is called the annunciation. If it is going to mean anything, then it must announce. God comes into the world to announce to the poor that God has acted in their behalf. God comes to the world to announce to migrant workers, and fast food chain workers that God comes to be with them. God comes to announce that prejudice over race, language, sexual orientation are not to rule the day. God comes to announce that the church is an inclusive fellowship for all. And God comes to announce that God comes for all the people – not just the narrow circle that we as Christians sometimes want to draw. God comes to announce that everyone on the face of this earth is important – a child of God. The hymn announces "Love came down at Christmas" and love does not discriminate. The Christmas story is our story. But it does not say that God doesn't love the Muslims, Hindus, Jews. We are all God's children.

Here we are, fourth Sunday in Advent. We know about these call stories in our own lives. There is hurt. Pain. Injustice. Discrimination. God calls to us and our response is pretty much the same as those other called people. "You want me to what?" And God's response is always the same. "Fear not. I will be with you."

Hearing those words, we can respond with Mary, "Here I am, the servant of the Lord. Let it be with me according to your word."

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