

God's Choice

Luke 1:26-38 *In the sixth month, the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore, the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God!" Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord, let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her.*

Have you ever wondered what Mary was doing when the angel Gabriel came to her that day? This story of what the church calls "The Annunciation" – the time when God announced through an angel that Mary would become pregnant with God's son and be the one to bear Christ into the world – is the source of many paintings, stained-glass windows and other images. In many of these images Mary is praying on her knees, or maybe sitting in a corner on a stool and wearing a long, flowing, whitish robe. She most often has perfectly combed hair and a holy glow around her head or on her face. The room she is in is usually clean and tidy.

And who knows? Maybe she *was* praying. And maybe she *was* well groomed at that time. And maybe she *was* an immaculate housekeeper. The text doesn't tell us. But a young woman back then also had quite a bit of work to do, so it would make sense that the scene may have looked a little different than the pictures we see. Maybe she was doing dishes or emptying the pot that

people in the house used to go to the bathroom in during the night. Maybe she was cleaning something or trying to figure out how to make a meal from some food she had. Maybe she had animals to tend to. Or maybe she was daydreaming about what it would be like to be married to Joseph, her fiancé. Maybe she hadn't washed up yet and her hair was tied back in a disheveled bun. Maybe she was thinking that she needed to go to the market and was dreading having to avoid the glare of the Roman soldiers.

What Mary Was *Not* Expecting

But no matter what she was doing or how she looked, we surely can surmise that she was not expecting any visitor, much less an angel, for goodness sake! She didn't wake up that morning thinking, "A messenger from God is coming today to tell me my purpose in life, I'd better be sure the room is picked up and clean. I'd better be sure that my hair is combed and I have on my most beautiful, flowing outfit." And the "purpose" thing: As a young, poor Jewish girl, she probably didn't give much thought to her purpose, because she knew what it was. She would be married, and that marriage would have been arranged for her. She would have children, do the best she could with the limited resources her family would have, and seek to follow her God and stay safe in a world where the Romans ruled and Jewish people were surely second-class citizens.

So it was an ordinary day. And Mary was most likely doing some ordinary task. And the house may have been a mess. And she may have had sweat coming from her brow because she lived in a region that was hot a lot of the time and there wasn't air conditioning. She didn't live in a time when they could shower every day and get deodorant at Meijer or Walgreens, so chances are she was a bit dirty and maybe even a bit smelly. And it is in the middle of this ordinary humanness that something very holy happens.

And it was an ordinary, out-of-the-way place: Nazareth in Galilee. This wasn't the teeming city of Jerusalem. This wasn't New York City or Rome, with splendid buildings and fabulous foods and women donned in clothes laced with gold. This was like ... Galien in Berrien County.

And on this ordinary day in this simple place, a messenger from God comes and tells Mary that she is highly favored and that God is with her. And that she will be pregnant with the Son of God! God shows up in an out-of-the way place, to the lowliest of women, to announce that God is coming to be born among us, and God has chosen Mary. And the text tells us that this greeting confused her and perplexed her. What would this mean: God had chosen her?

And it doesn't seem that she has much choice in the matter, does it? All the verbs are imperative. You will become pregnant. You will give birth to a son. You will call him Jesus. She isn't asked, "Is this OK with you Mary?" No, the verbs are "you will!"

But she does have a choice about how she will handle this gift and this challenge. What an incredible gift to bear Jesus into the world! But the challenge is immense, too. Pregnant out of wedlock? What would Joseph say? What would her parents say? Would anyone really believe her? Mary says "Yes" to God, even though she is afraid and uncertain.

Immense Joy – *And* Hardship

Oh, this story, happening among ordinary people, is full of joy, but also much hardship and uncertainty.

And really, my brothers and sisters, this entire story of God's coming into our world – this entire Christmas story of God reaching out for all of us, of God coming to be born among us – is steeped in ordinariness. It is steeped in the stuff of being human in this world. It is steeped in wonder, but also in hardship and uncertainty. The people God chooses in this story are pretty simple folk – a poor young woman, a simple carpenter and shepherds, who were some of the most outcast members of that society. Nobody of this cast of characters has degrees behind their names. Other than the wise men, who were astrologers and most likely not people of any traditional kind of faith, the people involved had very limited resources. Folks, they were downright poor. These were certainly not people who were anywhere close to the "rich and

famous.” And think of the smells. People traveling without showers. A stable with animals that probably hadn’t been cleaned in a while. My friends, we clean up this story to make it pristine and glowing. But it was not that way.

It was God’s choice to show up smack dab in the middle of human circumstances and ordinariness. God could have chosen to show up anywhere – the fanciest castle, on a boat in the Mediterranean, among the rich and powerful of the day. But God’s choice was to show up in the likes of Mary.

Charlie Brown & The Grinch

On Facebook this week, someone asked the question, “What is your favorite Christmas movie?” It was fun to read the answers: “It’s A Wonderful Life,” “A Charlie Brown Christmas,” “Miracle on 34th Street,” “How The Grinch Stole Christmas,” “The Christmas Story,” and more. As you think about your favorite movies, don’t many of them contain the theme of the Christmas spirit showing up in ordinary life or transforming human pain?

In “A Charlie Brown Christmas,” the real story shows up amid Charlie Brown’s frustration with commercialism as some children try to get together a Christmas play. This story has echoes of the theme from other favorite Christmas movies – the heart of an old Grinch or Scrooge growing because of the love that comes to him, or George Bailey coming to the realization that his life truly has been wonderful. Many movie makers grasp the reality that part of the miracle of Christmas is that it happens to ordinary people, and sometimes to people who are not too nice.

And most often it comes as gift. Jesus is born into the middle of life. Jesus is born into the middle of our human joys and human messes.

We Are Called to Birth Christ’s Love

Now let's get back to Mary. After questioning the angel, after receiving this news that she will be Jesus' mom, Mary does offer herself to God. Yes, God, may it be done to me according to your word. In this ordinary life. In this miracle and hardship. I trust you. And while she had the joy of being Jesus' mother, Mary also had the anguish of observing all he went through and watching him die on a cross.

Isn't it incredible to think about whom God chooses to accomplish God's plans in the world? Ordinary, struggling, confused women like Mary – ordinary, confused and sometimes struggling men and women like me and you. The church fathers and mothers call Mary Theotokos – Christ bearer or God bearer. The one who births Christ, the one who births love into the world.

And you and me – we are called to be Theotokos, too. We have not been given the honor and challenge of becoming literally pregnant with Jesus, but even as Christ lives in us, we are called to birth Christ's love into the world in the ordinary places we live and work.

Think of the ordinary stuff of our lives: cooking, cleaning, or not cleaning, and laundry. Boring days in the office, helping our children in the bathroom or arguing with them about getting their socks on so they don't miss the school bus. Cleaning up the messes our animals make, or our children make, or our spouses make, smelling Christmas cookies baking, hugging our loved ones, arguing with our loved ones. Getting that paper done for the teacher we can't stand.

Think about what is going on in our world today. Anguish in Syria, and refugees trying to find their way to freedom. Conflict and pain in our own United States as we transition into a new presidency.

God's Spirit will come upon us

God shows up at church and when we are in prayer, but if this story of the Annunciation and Christmas are true, and we believe they are, they are evidence that God also chooses to show up in the ordinary places of our lives, amid the confusion in our world, and to call us favored, to tell us that God is with us and that God chooses to birth love into the world through the likes of us.

You may say: "How can that be!" Ah, indeed, Mary asked that, too. And this is the answer she was given: God's Spirit would come upon her and overshadow her.

And that is the answer for us, too. God's Spirit will come upon us and overshadow us. Not necessarily because we are so great or have the right training or are even ready for God's invitation. This will be God's job. It's God's choice to use ordinary folk like us, and it's God's job to send God's spirit to give us what we need to do the job.

And we, like Mary, get to decide how we will receive this invitation. Do we have the courage to live into the wild plans God has for our lives?

Christ is Born in Your Actions

This week, as I was thinking about you, the members and friends of First Presbyterian Church in Benton Harbor, I began thinking about how God was being born into the world through you:

- In faithful work in workplaces you don't care for but you stay in because it helps support your family. Christ is born there in your faithfulness.
- On the psych unit, showing acceptance and love to people the world dismisses. Christ is born there.
- At home with a struggling spouse, doing your best to show compassion even when the future is uncertain. Christ is born as you struggle to make tough decisions.
- In places where racism raises its ugly head. I know that many of you courageously speak truth and peace into those situations. Yes, Christ is born when you speak that hard word in love.

- Loving children in school;
- Taking time to look that homeless person in the eye and really seek to see him or her;
- Teenagers showing respect to adults and even showing up to help serve Thursday night supper;
- Visiting lonely people;
- Showing kindness and understanding to a hospital worker after having unexpected surgery;
- Thoughtful planning of how to manage your workers in ways that all voices are respected;
- Making sure that plate of food you made for someone is done with love;
- Picking up the grandchildren from school and giving them a hug after a long day;
- Being kind and gracious to the Meijer's checkout lady during this busy season;
- Seeking to stand up for justice and truth no matter what.

Oh, the myriad of ways that Christ is born among us in the ordinary places in our lives.

We Are All Pregnant

The Advent symbol as we get ready for Christmas is the baby. As we are waiting for Christ to be born, let us remember that we, too, are called to bear Christ into this world. Like Meister Eckhart says, "We are all meant to be mothers of God." We are pregnant, my brothers and sisters.

Pregnant with a love that God longs to give birth in our lives and in our world. Pregnant with love that God longs to birth in the very ordinary places of our lives. Pregnant with love that God longs to birth into the hard places in our lives. Pregnant with love that God longs to birth into the lonely places in our lives and world. May we be given the grace to receive it and be faithful bearers of it.

Now, more than ever, our country and the world need this love to show up, not just in big and grand places, but in small, out-of-the-way, daily, ordinary places. Think of how the fabric of our world would change if we Christians could be more faithful and mindful of bearing Christ in our lives. Even as Mary had the courage to offer herself as God's instrument, may we have the courage and faith and hope to offer ourselves and our congregation to God. May God's love be birthed into the world in our lives and through our lives!

Hail, Favored Ones! The Lord is with you! May we be given the grace and courage to faithfully bear Christ into this world!

Amen.