

“HERE I AM, LORD!”
Luke 1:26-38, 47-55
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The other night my wife and I were at a restaurant when a teenage girl came in carrying a baby. Upon second glance we realized that she wasn't carrying a baby after all, but a baby-sized doll. We speculated by the way she was “caring” for the doll that she is taking that class in high school where the students are given the assignment of pretending that they have a baby. They are to take care of the doll for a week, so that they will get a better idea of the responsibilities that come with having children. In such programs that I am familiar with, the so-called “baby” is yours for the week. When you need to take a shower, go to the store, do your studying, when you want to visit with your friends, you can't just leave the doll on the chair in the corner of the room. You have to make provisions for this little person's care — 24 hours a day.

Now, of course, babies sleep a lot, but when they are awake, they demand our attention! Nothing changes our lives quite like the arrival of a baby! Babies begin to change our lives as we prepare to redecorate a room for them known as the nursery. Babies change our lives as we buy diapers and formula and get a car seat and a crib. Then, just when we think we are ready for this new little person to come into our lives, baby arrives with all the unpredictability that is typical of human life. Some babies never stop crying, or so it seems. Some never stop eating. Just ask mom. All of them have a way of rearranging our lives! Someone recently commented, “When our children were brought home from the hospital in their first days of life, there were times when I would stand there and look into the crib and marvel at how something so small, so vulnerable as this baby could jerk around our lives!” We make plans, we have our lists of what needs to be done and what we want to accomplish. But then along comes baby, and our plans can get changed in a hurry!

Today's Gospel lesson is the story of such a disruption, a total change of plans that came about due to the arrival of an unexpected baby. An angel shows up in a little town in Galilee called Nazareth, and the angel goes to a young woman whose name is Mary. Even after the friendly greeting by this angel, Mary welcomes the angel with less than open arms at first. She is “*much perplexed by his words.*” (Luke 1:29) The first thing that the angel says to her is “*Do not be afraid.*” Why would the angel need to say that to her? Because the angel is bringing radical change and disruption into her life. The angel tells her that she has “*found favor with God.*” Some favoritism! She will bear a child, out of wedlock. She will see the townspeople turn their heads when she walks down the street. She will have to endure the gossip of the villagers as well. Mary likely will have to face scrutiny from her fellow townspeople, as the stigma and punishment of a premarital pregnancy was far greater than it is today. She will have to explain to Joseph what has happened, and hope that he will believe her. Then, when it comes

time for the birth, she will have to endure the long trip to Bethlehem. Finally, in a world without anesthesia or antiseptics, she will have to endure the pain of childbirth, not in the birthing suite of the local hospital, but in makeshift accommodations of a barn, with the cows and sheep.

The story is familiar to most of us. Yet have you stopped to reflect upon its meaning lately? Last Sunday we heard from John the Baptist, the half-crazed preacher who wore weird clothes, ate strange food and told the people to repent, to turn their lives around and get ready for the coming of the Messiah. We said that just as the Bible tells us that *“There was a man sent from God whose name was John,”* so there is a man sent from God whose name is Charlie, a man sent from God whose name is Pete, Doug, Bruce, Shawn, Del, Dick, Paul. There is a woman sent from God whose name is Martha, Renee, Chris, Sara. Every boy is sent from God, and every girl. God has created you for a purpose. There is a reason why you are here.

Now this morning we find God calling a teenage girl for a specific purpose. After long debate, this country gave women the right to vote in 1920. In 1956, in its wisdom, the General Conference of the United Methodist Church voted to allow women to become pastors. Yet, my friends, women have been called by God since the dawn of creation. Haven’t you read the story of Sarah, mother of the Jewish people? Do you remember the story of Hannah, the mother of Samuel? Have you heard the story this Christmas season of Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist? All these women were called by God. It has only taken the church two thousand years to get the picture, to catch up with what God has been doing all along.

Our Lectionary reading this morning is a classic **“call to ministry”** story involving the mother of our Lord, Mary. As in the other biblical “call” stories, first there is the word of the Lord, followed by her standard response. Then a divine “Fear not!” Mary asks a question, receives an answer, and finally relents and accepts God’s vision for her future. The basic pattern is as old as God’s call to Abraham and to Moses. Mary is simply the latest in a long line of God’s chosen witnesses, all who have done their part to prepare the way of the Lord. She is not the first woman to be enlisted in the divine, prophetic service. Miriam, Sarah, Hanna, Elizabeth, Ruth, Esther and the list goes on. These and a host of others preceded her. What sets Mary apart is the level of difficulty and disruption that is being demanded of her.

From time to time we preachers present Jesus as the solution to our problems, and he is. He is the one who can still the storms of life and bring peace and stability to our troubled lives. Yet he also brings disruption as he intrudes into our comfort zones. Remember, he came to earth as a baby, and babies change everything! This child, born in the stable, is born to reign, to rule, and to establish a new kingdom that will destabilize all the kingdoms of this world — past, present and future. This new “king” will disrupt and disorder in order to heal and restore. A dear friend of mine used to say, **“Christ came to comfort the afflicted and to afflict the comfortable.”** That’s it in a nutshell!

Like other women throughout history, like women today, Mary is called by God for a special task. Mary questions how the birth will take place, but she willingly submits to God’s plan for her life. Her response is a model for all women everywhere. Her response is an example for all of us, male and female alike. As one of the commentators suggests, this Gospel lesson invites us to consider the annunciations we have received as individuals and as a community. Where have we been led to say, “Let it be with us according to your Word?” What are the great moments of commitment when we have allowed God to overshadow us? When have we turned our backs and walked away, maintaining the status quo rather than opening

ourselves to the Spirit of God?

My friends, God is waiting for our “yes.” When Mary said “yes,” she did not know about the silent night of birth in a stable or the angelic hosts singing and praising God. She did not know about the visit to the Temple with twelve-year-old Jesus. She could not have foreseen that her son would willingly place himself in harm’s way for the sake of others. Would she have said “yes” if she had known about the betrayal of her son that would lead to the hill of Calvary and his crucifixion? Mary only knew that if she said “yes” to God, everything would change for her. And everything did! Babies have a way of doing that, don’t they?

Contemporary theologian and New Testament scholar Raymond Brown suggests that Luke views Mary as the first disciple.⁽¹⁾ As such, she is the first to acknowledge that with the coming of Jesus a new age has begun. Mary not only says “yes” to God, but she proclaims the good news to all who will hear her, starting with her cousin Elizabeth. In “The Magnificat,” (Luke 1:47-55) Mary’s song of praise, she shares her vision of what God has in mind not only for her, but for the whole human race. According to Mary, the birth of this child is just the beginning of what God is going to do in the world.

When we are expecting a baby, we dream and plan for what this child will be like and what he or she may accomplish in life. Mary did that, too. She foresaw the day when her child would turn the world upside down! “*He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly,*” she sings. “*He has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.*”

This has to be the most revolutionary Advent song ever sung! This is not the gentle, tender, dreamy Mary we sometimes see in paintings and on Christmas cards. This is the passionate, surrendered, proud, enthusiastic Mary who has caught the vision of what God has done in the past and is about to do in her life for the benefit of the world.

Throughout Christian history Mary has occupied a special place in the life of the church. That is appropriate, for she was chosen to give birth to the Son of God. Yet Mary would not want us to worship her. I think she would be embarrassed with all the praise she sometimes receives. Instead, I think she would want us to join her in praising God, who continues to call women and men in our day to follow, to catch the vision of what God is doing in the world, and to join with God in bringing justice and peace and healing to the world in which we live.

Mary said “yes” to God. I repeat, God is waiting for our “yes.” What is God asking us to do? Where is God calling us to go? Will we let God impregnate us with his message of hope and help for all people? Will we let God’s Word give birth in our hearts and lives that hope may flourish and bloom and build a world of justice and peace? Each time we say “yes,” the Holy Spirit overshadows us and something new comes to birth in us.

Mary courageously disturbed the people around her. We are called to do the same thing. Like Mary, we may not fully comprehend what our “yes” will mean. But in faith that surpasses our knowledge and trusting God with our very lives, may we boldly say with Mary, “*Here am I, Lord.*” I am your servant. I give myself to you. Help me to do whatever you ask me to do this day and every day. ***Here I am , Lord.*** Here I am.

Prayer: Dear God, just as the angel Gabriel came and told Mary that you had a special task for her to perform, so we believe that you are calling us to ministries of justice and love in our world today. Help us to say “yes” to your calling, as Mary did. We pray in Jesus’ name. Amen.

Note:

1. Brown, Raymond. *The Birth of the Messiah*. New York: Doubleday, 1993, pp. 355f.