

Year B

Fourth Sunday in Advent

2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16

Psalms 89:1-4, 19-26

Romans 16:25-27

Luke 1:26-38

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.

The Advent journey through scripture has gradually prepared us for Christmas. Our lessons started with despair, but by the time we reach this fourth Sunday of Advent, we have readings filled with joy, and are presented with the very promise of the birth of our Savior. But hearing this can be simultaneously both a joyful experience, and a struggle. Especially today, when we have the fourth Sunday of Advent, and Christmas Eve on the same day, we are on the very brink of our major celebration. Some of us have not finished our Christmas shopping. Some still have a lot to do before guests arrive. Some might be dealing with a work crisis that cares nothing about holidays. Some are anticipating a first Christmas without a loved one. And many people across the world are trying to celebrate in the midst of war, or famine.

But today's readings show us that the reason we celebrate is because of joy. Not happiness—remember, happiness is about our immediate circumstances—happiness can go up and down like the temperature. But joy is like a thermostat, if you will. Joy is what sets the temperature, and we can feel the joy of God's love, even in the midst of stress, anxiety, or unhappiness. For instance, the apostle Paul talks often of his joy in God's love, even when he is writing letters from prison. So we can have joy that God's faithful love gives us this Savior. Joy that God has always been with us, and then also came to us in this particular way through a special person named Mary.

In Luke's Gospel we hear the story of the Annunciation of the angel Gabriel to Mary. We've heard this so many times that today it might have gone in one ear and out the other, but today let's look at Mary's response to Gabriel, and how she says "yes" to God's call for her to be the mother of God. Notice that Gabriel doesn't immediately tell her not to be afraid, as angels often do, but says, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." And Mary is not afraid, but is "much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be." She is perplexed, puzzled, bewildered—really, think for a minute; if an angel appeared to you, and said this, wouldn't you be troubled? Mary is a poor nobody from an unknown lineage (remember Joseph is from the house of David, not Mary). She has no reason at all to think that she is "favored" by the Lord. Then Gabriel tells her not to be afraid, because she has found favor with God. Without giving her time to think about why that might be, Gabriel launches into the divine plan, "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."

Again, I invite you to put yourself in Mary's place for a minute. If you are not female, it will be a bit more challenging—but only a little. Because Mary thinks that what Gabriel is telling her is impossible for *her*, too. She is a young maiden, but she understands how pregnancy and birth work. She knows that without a man, she can't get pregnant. So she does what many prophets have done in the face of their call to ministry: she objects. Mary says, "'How can this be, since I am a virgin?'" This is not a meek and mild Mary—this is not a person without agency or will. Mary basically says, "I don't understand how what you are saying can possibly happen." Maybe Gabriel has the wrong person?

But no, "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." Gabriel says this will be the most remarkable of miracles. Not only will a virgin bear a child, but God will become human flesh in her womb. There is no biological explanation for this miracle, because, as Gabriel also says, "For nothing will be impossible with God." Now Mary is convinced. It's not about Joseph, it's not about how things usually work with having babies; this is completely different in almost every way. Now Mary has to decide whether she will take on the humiliation of telling Joseph that she's pregnant, when he knows the baby is not his. Is he likely to believe what the angel has said? Now Mary has to risk being "put aside," by Joseph, and shamed within her community for bearing an illegitimate child. They are *unlikely* to believe what the angel has said. This could turn out very badly for her. But she says YES.

"Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word," she says. When we were discussing this passage in Adult Forum a couple of weeks ago, several people suggested that Mary didn't really have any choice in this. But prophets often object at first—they can say no. Remember Jonah? He ran from God, and ended up in the belly of a giant fish for a while. Eventually he did say yes, but he was always somewhat unwilling. We don't hear about the prophets who say no, and God then looks elsewhere, so we don't know how many there have been. Mary does object at first, but then she says YES. She's not reluctant to embrace this call. Not only does she say yes, but a few verses later when she goes to visit her cousin Elizabeth, she sings the Magnificat, which we have instead of our psalm today.

My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord,
my spirit rejoices in God my Savior; *
for he has looked with favor on his lowly servant.

From this day all generations will call me blessed: *
the Almighty has done great things for me, and holy is his Name.

Mary takes on this mission joyfully, realizing the tremendous honor that has been bestowed upon her. She will be the God Bearer, the Mother of God, the person whom God uses to come into the world. The shame of her community, the possibility that Joseph might break their engagement, these things cannot smother

the joy that Mary experiences in the love and presence of the Holy Spirit. She might be unhappy from time to time because of agreeing to this call, but she is joyful.

It can be easy for us to take all of this for granted, because we hear about it every year. But this year, think especially about Mary and the strength and courage it took for her to say yes to this overwhelming call. Think about Mary's resounding, joyful YES to God. And as you hear the Christmas readings, embrace the joy of the Holy Spirit as it takes shape in the Incarnate Jesus. Amen

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