

FOURTH SUNDAY IN ADVENT, SERIES B, 12/24/2017

PRINCE OF PEACE EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN, POLAND / CHRIST LUTHERAN, STRUTHERS

2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16, Psalm 89:1-4, 19-26, Romans 16:25-27, Luke 1:26-38

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Savior Jesus Christ, Amen.

Once upon a time, or maybe just 60 years ago, a little girl, three years old to be exact, was attending Sunday Mass. She paid close attention to all that was happening and truly enjoyed being in worship. She was fascinated with the actions of the priest, and followed closely the prayers, including the Roman tradition of the "Hail Mary's."

It was here that her eagerness to please God overcame her mother's admonition not to talk out loud. As the last "hail Mary" was said, the little girl clearly felt that not enough had been said about Mary. So, in a clear, honest voice that only a child can offer, she began to sing a George M Cohan tune: For it was Mary, Mary...

While it was a total embarrassment to her parents, it was a real joy to others. The truth is that the little girl was right. When it comes to faith, and accepting the call from God to serve God, it was Mary.

It was Mary who demonstrated what it means to be in total obedience to God's will. It was Mary who accepted a role in her life which would set her apart from others in the centuries to come. It was Mary who, while perplexed, believed the promise which Gabriel presented to her. It was Mary who became known as the Blessed One, the Holy Mother, the Bearer of God.

Mary did this in three ways. Firstly, as a person, secondly as a woman, and thirdly as a mother. Let's look at her through these three lenses to see how she was obedient. Then we can consider how we might use her as a model of faithfulness in our own lives.

First, how did Mary demonstrate obedience to God as a person? Any person might be perplexed by such a greeting as this from the angel. I find it odd that she did not seem to be puzzled by the appearance of this angel, but instead by the words. In Mary's time a greeting like that implied a divine identity not heard in normal greetings. To be called the favored one of God implied she was divine. It would be a bit unsettling, to say the least.

Through the centuries, much has been made about the angel's greeting. Many legends and traditions have grown from efforts to explain it. For example, you've probably heard of the phrase, "Immaculate Conception." But did you know that it is not a reference to Jesus' conception but to Mary's? Some faith traditions believe that if Mary was the vessel for the Son of God, she could only do this if she had been conceived and born without the stain of original sin on her own soul.

Another tradition declares that she was taken to the Temple at the age of three and dedicated to the Lord's service. Left there by her parents, Mary was raised by the Temple priests, betrothed to an elderly man named Joseph, who promised to honor her holy calling.

And, finally, there is the tradition which claims that this angel's greeting means that Mary had a grace of her own which she could pour out on others just as God pours out God's grace upon us.

However, the scriptures are silent on these matters. What is apparent in this divine greeting to Mary is that somehow her life had been a real joy and delight to God. This is something we all desire to be, yet, we must confess that we don't always meet this ideal.

Mary also received God's call and responded to it as a woman. She is asked to be the mother of the Son of God. The expression, "Mother of God," is not intended to be used as a curse, but as a sign of reverence for the immense task set before her. Mary does not quiz the angel as to the Father's identity, or why the child is to be named Jesus. Instead, she gets to the heart of the matter: How can this be, since I am a virgin?

To Mary, the woman, this was a matter of reality and practicality. We would call it a matter of biology. It was also a matter of the history of God's relationship with God's people. At no other time in history, from the creation of the world forward, had God ever acted in such a supernatural way. God's way was to take advantage of creation's laws of nature and physics to meet the needs of God's people. Even the conceptions announced to Sarah and Abraham, and to Elizabeth and Zechariah regarding the coming of children to them - in their advanced years - were understood to have been biological encounters of the human kind.

How could it be that at this moment in history, God was choosing to go outside of His own natural laws and ask this young woman to forego her anticipated life with such an uncommon request? How could it be that Mary could bear a son? Mary knew how things ought to be done. She asked, "How can this be?"

The angel assured her that God had a way. In the birth, death, and resurrection of Jesus, God was doing something entirely new. Through the life, death, and new life of Jesus, God would set humanity free from the penalties of sin. Whoever believes this shall be saved and have eternal life. That had never been done before.

Mary responded to this unusual call as any woman, any person, would hope to respond to God: Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.

St. Bernard, yes there really was a human St. Bernard, observed that there are three miracles taking place here: 1) that God and humanity could be joined in this Child; 2) that a woman should remain a virgin and yet conceive; and 3) that Mary should have such faith as to believe that this mystery would be accomplished in her.

Martin Luther, in pondering these three miracles, thought that the first two miracles were mere trifles for God. After -- God is God and can do whatever God chooses. But this third miracle, that Mary would have such faith, is crucial to the rest of history. Luther points out that if Mary had not believed, she could not have conceived.

Think about that. If Mary had refused this call because it seemed too ridiculous a notion, or because it was not in line with her own plans for her future, the coming of the Messiah could not have happened. If Mary had not believed that Gabriel was an angel of the Lord, this could not have taken place. If Mary had said, "No", there would have been no baby, no savior of the world, and very likely, no life as we know it now. If Mary had not believed she could not have conceived.

Christian author and Presbyterian pastor Frederick Buechner has wondered if the angel Gabriel stood there holding his breath, knowing that the entire future of humanity rested on her answer. People argue that if Mary had refused, then God would have found another woman. Or, that God already knew what her answer would be. But in the end, Mary did have to believe that this could be happening to her, and with her.

Does it make you wonder how many calls from God have died before they were begun, for lack of belief? How many times might people have turned their backs on God because the call was too unbelievable? To make it more personal, can we think of times in our own lives when we have not heeded a call from God because it didn't seem plausible? Or, maybe we didn't want to believe that God really meant it for me, or you?

On the other hand, to believe that God has selected just one way for each of us to serve may be rather arrogant on our part. Perhaps God sets out many opportunities before us. I know a couple who were invited to serve as missionaries in Africa upon his graduation from dental school. They turned it down, and chose instead, to set up a practice here in the United States. In addition, they became very active in a local congregation and developed a children's ministry there which served God for over 30 years. They accepted a call to serve God.

As for Mary, her acceptance to this particular and peculiar calling from God set a new course for humankind. And here we see the final way in which Mary chose to be an obedient servant of the Lord. She accepted the role as mother. She cared for her son. She nurtured him, mothered him, loved him, worried about him, watched him grow, and watched him die.

Even as she was perplexed, she believed the promise presented to her by God. We could do much worse than use Mary as an example of what it means to obey and serve God. In her we see what it can mean to accept in faith God's invitation to be an active part of God's plan for the world. In Mary we see how such acceptance can mean trials and tribulations, heartache, but also joy.

Most of us aren't granted an angelic visit to inform us of God's plan. However, through prayer, meditation, pondering, and faith, we can discern God's opportunities for us, and answer, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your will." Amen