

Luke 1:26-38, Dec. 18, 2011

Fourth Sunday of Advent

A Reason to Rejoice

The angel said to Mary, “You have found favor with God” and Mary wondered what sort of greeting this might be. She didn’t understand how she could have a baby when she was a virgin. The same thing we would wonder. And we wonder who this woman was who was chosen by God for such an amazing role in history.

At the beginning of the passage, Mary is not even named until after we find out that she is a virgin and her fiancé is Joseph, a descendant of David.

She was chosen because of who she was going to marry.

Scripture does not mention anything special about her. She was a virgin, but there were other virgins in Israel. We are not told that she was especially holy or pure or sinless other than that.

From all evidence, she was a young girl living in a small town, not rich, not educated, not wise beyond her years, not well-travelled or exceptional in any way. We don't really know all that much about her.

But the angel said, "You have found favor with God."

We don't know why God favored her. Or why God chose that time or that place. Or why Joseph, other than his ancestry.

It's just that it was God's time to intervene in the world, and this was the way the intervention would happen.

Mary was perplexed and wondering about the greeting from the angel, and that reminds me that Moses and Jeremiah and other prophets also questioned their call from God.

I am sure that Mary was wondering why God chose her just as the prophets had wondered----Moses hesitated because he was "slow of tongue" and Jeremiah asked why him, since he was only a boy.

Many people called by God have asked "why me?"

And God's answer has been "Why not you?" God said, in effect, "don't question, just go and do! I know what I'm doing!" Mary, a young, ordinary, country girl was chosen by God, who knew what he was doing!

He knew that the ordinary people living in the countryside of Israel needed to know that God was with them, that he cares for them.

The educated city people---the priests and the scribes and the Pharisees---
- already believed that God was with them. They thought they had that relationship with God already, so they weren't looking for it. They weren't feeling hopeless and helpless and abandoned.

It was the ordinary people going through their ordinary lives, people who worked hard at fishing to put food on the table, people who sometimes ran out of wine at weddings, people who sat begging by the side of the road because they were blind, people who were outcast because of a skin disease called leprosy, people who were shunned because they were not Jewish----it was for those people that Jesus was born into this world!

And Mary was one of them---one of the working class people who lived in the countryside---

Those ordinary people who needed to know that God could be part of their lives.

Mary had found favor with God, and so the angel came to her.

Now, consider this! Suppose that Mary was not the first young woman that the angel came to.

Suppose she was the second or the third or even further down the list than that?

And the ones before her had all said NO?

Suppose their answer was, "Are you kidding? Pregnant before marriage? It will ruin my life, my fiancé will leave me, my parents will throw me out, and the townspeople will never speak to me again! And I won't be welcome in the synagogue any more! And you're telling me I have found favor with God?? I don't think so!"

Suppose that really happened? Or suppose that Mary herself had responded that way?

God would have had to ask someone else, or else asked her over and over until she finally said yes.

She didn't have to say yes, after all. She had free will just like the rest of us do. Just like all of us, she had a choice.

And she chose to say yes to God!

By saying "Let it be with me according to your word," she allowed God to change her life!

And because she said yes to that change in her own life, God was able to change the whole world!

By giving birth to the Son of God, Mary allowed the whole world to see God!

Since the beginning, God had always been a mystery, invisible and untouchable. People believed that no one could see God and live to tell the story.

Mary's son made God tangible and real and solid. Ordinary people, not just prophets, could hear God speak. They could feel God's hands touch them and know the healing power of God first-hand!

Mary's son revealed the mysteries of the creator of the universe to everyone.

God himself walked the earth, and because we have a record of that, we know a lot more about the nature of God than we did before Mary said yes! And we know it's possible to have a close relationship with God even today!

And this is a reason to rejoice!

If a powerless, ordinary young woman in a small town in a little country that was occupied by a dictatorship in another country could say yes, if she could step out of her comfort zone and take a huge chance that her life would be changed dramatically,

if she could take a chance that this decision wouldn't work out, that she might very well end up losing everything, including her firstborn son----

can we say yes to God, too?

Can we find it in ourselves to trust God with everything that we are, with our plans for our future, with everything that we do and know?

Can we, who are ordinary people, just trying to do the best we can, believe that God favors us, that God calls us to do extraordinary things?

Can we say yes? Can we say, as Mary did, “Let it be with me according to your word!”?

Or will God have to go and ask someone else?

Mary said yes and her ordinary life changed forever.

She was blessed to be the mother of Jesus Christ, to bring him up the best she could. Like all mothers, she probably didn't know what to do with him at times. There were probably times when she just shook her head to remember the angels and the shepherds, the wise men and Joseph's dreams.

And then she had to watch him die on a cross---a high price to pay for saying yes to God!

Saying yes to God is never without its sacrifice. To say yes to God is to say no to your ordinary, reasonable, predictable life.

To say yes to God means that nothing will ever be the same again.

But in the extraordinary things that God brings us to, there are many blessings, and the grace and presence of God is there with us in it all!

So, you who have found favor with God, what is it that the voice of God is asking of you? How is God breaking into your ordinary, average life?

What is it that you are wondering if you can do, and how can it be true that God is calling you to do something that doesn't seem possible?

What is it that you are hesitating to do, that you are reluctant to say, "Let it be with me according to your word!"?

Because God still does call us to be part of his plans. We are still called to play our part in changing the world!

All of us are called to deepen our relationship with Christ, to follow him more closely, to be his hands and feet and voice in this world. How are you called to live that out?

This is a call from God to stop being ordinary and become extraordinary, a call to stop being passive and start being active, a call to stop letting someone else do the work and be the ones who answer when we hear Christ knocking on the door.

And so I ask again, will you be like Mary and say yes?

Because when you do, then all of the angels in heaven will have a reason to rejoice! When you say yes, the world will be transformed, and that is a reason for the world to rejoice!

Lord, let it be with each one of us according to your word. Amen.