

MARY: CALL AND RESPONSE - LOVE

Advent 4 Year B

2 Sam. 7:1-11, 16; Ps. 89:1-4, 19-26; Rom. 16:25-27; Lk. 1:26-38 Gladstone 20/12/2020

When a young man falls in love with a young woman, he often resorts to very extravagant language to express his emotion. He may say things like, “I would climb the highest mountain for you, I would swim the deepest river for you, I would walk through fire for you.” He may even say, “I would die for you.”

“Darling, do you love me...”

Everyone knows—especially the young woman if she is at all smart—that he doesn’t really mean anything of the kind. These are only figures of speech that he is using. In fact, in nine cases out of ten, at the first sign of suffering, the young man disappears in a cloud of dust—never to be heard from again. We could ignore all of this except for the very troubling fact that this concept of “suffering love” is built into the very heart of Scripture. And, it is built into the very heart of the Christian life. If we really love another person, we will be willing to suffer with that person and for that person. We will be willing to be inconvenienced. We will be willing to be humiliated. It’s called “commitment.”

The Christian accepts this voluntarily because this is at the core of what it means to belong to God and to Jesus Christ. This is where so many of us begin to “cop out.” It’s one thing to come to Church and get a little inspiration and talk about belonging to Christ and talk about love. But when we get down to “where the rubber meets the road” many of us don’t seem to be ready for it—unless there is a level of unreserved commitment.

In the passage that we are looking at this morning, from Luke’s account of the gospel, the scene opens with a young woman, going about her business, whose name is Mary. Mary, we are told, was engaged to a man called Joseph. Now, we are not sure to what extent romance played in the relationship. By all accounts it was a marriage, both of convenience and for the protection of Mary—and there may well have been many years of age separation. What we do know, however—or at least we are soon to discover—is that there is a level of commitment there that few relationships could surpass.

The story of the announcement of Jesus’ birth, here in Luke chapter 1, provides us with a way of understanding the world of Mary, the reality of Christmas, and the potential for

our own spiritual lives. These verses, 26-38, are traditionally known as the Annunciation—the verses that come later and are often used in conjunction with this passage (vv. 46b-55) is known as the Magnificat. The first is the call of God. The second is the human response.

It is no accident that Mary takes centre stage this time of year. Mary is venerated by some Christians, ignored by some Christians, and misunderstood by other Christians. At times some have transformed the peasant Jewish teenage girl into an otherworldly Queen. At times others have pretended that she never existed, or they have missed the truth that she is the first disciple, and that she displays radical faith and trust in God.

Mary hears the call of God and she responds. She models faith, obedience, servanthood, discipleship and hospitality. The Annunciation, is the word of God, through the messenger, the angel Gabriel, to Mary. You have found favour with God. The power of the Holy Spirit will come upon you. You will give birth to the Saviour.

Mary asks, "How can this be?" Gabriel says to her, "Nothing will be impossible with God." The call of God is to an ordinary woman. It is the call to do something extraordinary. Nothing will be impossible with God.

There is a wonderful story about a man who was home with the children one afternoon while his wife went out Christmas shopping. He was reclining on the couch, half sleeping, half watching a football game, when the kids came into the room.

"Dad, we have a play to put on? Do you want to see it?"

He really didn't want to, but he knew he needed to, so he sat up, came out of his slumber, and became a one-man audience.

His four children, four, six, eight and ten years old, were the actors: Mary, Joseph, and the wise men. Joseph came in with a mop handle. Mary came in with a pillowcase under her pyjamas; another child was an angel, flapping her arms as wings.

Finally the last child, the eight year old, came out, with all of the jewellery on that she could find in the house, her arms filled with three presents. "I am all three wise men," she said. "I bring three precious gifts: gold, circumstance, and mud."¹

The father didn't laugh. He didn't correct the wise man. Rather, he reflected on the word that somehow got to the heart of the Christmas story: God loves us for who we are, our gold—where we are at our best; our circumstances—where we might be even now—and even our mud—where we are when we are most human.

God chose an ordinary human being—Mary—to be the vessel through which the Son of God would be born. What is impossible for us is possible with God. God can take our gold, our circumstance, our mud, and do something glorious with it. This is the Annunciation—the disruptive call of God, for Mary, and, who knows, perhaps for you and me.

There is also within the gospel lesson a response, the Magnificat! Mary says, "God has recognized the lowliness of his servant." In other words, I am an ordinary person. I am not perfect.

There is an ancient story that comes from the Middle East. A man was talking with a friend about his love life. "I thought I had found the perfect woman," he said. She was beautiful and had the most pleasing features a man could imagine. She was exceptional in every way, except she had no knowledge. So I travelled further, and met a woman who was both beautiful and intelligent. But, alas, we could not communicate. After further travels, I met a woman who had everything: a perfect mind, perfect intelligence, great beauty, all the features I was looking for, but..."

"What happened?" asked the friend who was listening. "Why didn't you marry her at once?" "Ah well," he replied, "as luck would have it, she was looking for the perfect man."²

The good news of the gospel is that when God begins to look for us, God is not looking for perfection. God chooses the ordinary. God loves the unlovable. In fact, God reverses just about every expectation we might have of how God would enter into this world and save it.

¹ James Moore, *Won't You Let Him In? An Advent Study For Adults*, page 30

² Todd Outcalt, *Candles In The Dark*, page 225

Does God flatter the proud? No, God scatters the proud. Does God seek an invitation from the throne? No, God brings those from thrones down and lifts up the lowly. Does God hang out at the finest restaurant? No, God throws a banquet for the poor. Does God choose a queen or a princess to be the mother of Jesus? No, God chooses Mary. Does God choose the wise and the noble and the powerful in this world to accomplish his will? No, God chooses you and me. Does God love those who are lovable? No. God loves the unlovable, God forgives the imperfect, God reaches out to the lost.

Christmas is really all about this attribute of God, who loves us, who reaches out, and reaches down to us, who “stoops to our weakness.” *Mild he lays his glory by*, Charles Wesley has it in the carol.³ God comes in the unspectacular and the humble.

That is what Christmas is all about. The clue is in the call of God to Mary and her response. God chooses the simple to confound the wise. God chooses the humble to shame the strong. God always chooses the ordinary to do something extra-ordinary. What is impossible for us is possible for God.

In a stable, probably more like a cave, on a hillside in the country, out of the way, a baby was born to two scared people. They had no gold to offer, only the circumstance of their lives. They heard the call of God, each in their own ways. And they responded in faith. Christmas, for us, some 2000+ years later, is no different.

If we really hear the gospel, if we truly perceive the voice of the One who calls us, there is encouragement—you have found favour with God. There is also, however, a growing edge, and that is to reflect in our own lives the very nature of God: to save, to bless, to do great things for God, to make God’s name Holy, to be merciful, to be reverent, to be strong, to put away pride, to place our leadership under the judgment of God, to remember that God is on the side of the oppressed, to feed the hungry, to serve, and to do all of this in remembrance of him.

So, what is God saying to you this Christmas? And what are you saying to God? What is impossible for us is possible for God. Come, Lord Jesus!

To him be all glory, honour, majesty and power. Amen.

³ *The United Methodist Hymnal*, pages 500, 240