

Fourth Sunday of Advent

Sermon preached by the Rev. Robert A. Arbogast

Olentangy Church

December 20, 2009

Micah 6:6-8 NRSV

With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?

He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

Luke 1:26-45

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee named Nazareth to a virgin promised in marriage to a man named Joseph from the house of David; and the virgin's name was Mary. He came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." But she was deeply troubled by his words. She wondered what kind of greeting this could be. The angel said to her, "Don't be afraid, Mary. You have found favor with God. You see, you will conceive in your womb, and you will bear a son, and you will call his name Jesus. He will be great, and he will be called Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give him the throne of his father David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever. And his kingdom will have no end."

But Mary said to the angel, "How will this be, since I am not intimate with a man?" In answer the angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. And so the holy one to be born will be called Son of God. You see, your relative Elizabeth has also conceived a son – in her old age – and though she was called barren, this is her sixth month, because nothing God says will be impossible." Then Mary said, "You see, the servant of the Lord. May it happen to me as you have said." And the angel left her.

Now in those days Mary got up and hurried off to a town in the hill country of Judah. She went into the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child in her womb jumped. Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit, and she let out a great cry: "You are blessed among women, and the fruit of your womb is blessed. How does this happen to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? You see, when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the child in my womb jumped for joy. Blessed is the one who trusted that what was spoken to her from the Lord will be accomplished."

Sermon

We're impatient to get to Christmas, especially by now, December 20. But Advent is a patient season, a patient season of penitence and preparation. And so there was a plea a few weeks ago for us to own up to the incompleteness of our faith, and the excess and numbness and worry that plague our day to day lives. And there was an acknowledgement two weeks ago of "road work" that we have to do, with the Holy Spirit's help, to be leveled and smoothed and straightened, to be changed thoroughly in our perception and priorities and behavior. And there was last week the urgent cry of John the Baptist to prepare our hearts and minds and spirits to welcome the Lord, so that Jesus can come to us to make us his own and come through us for the healing of the world.

Today is Advent's fourth Sunday. Christmas will keep for a few more days. We're still in the season of penitence and preparation, getting ready to remember the coming of the Lord in Bethlehem, getting ready to receive him, to welcome him as the Savior of the world, getting ready to hasten his return through faithfulness to the Gospel and through our prayers. Christmas will keep. Even so, today we turn to Mary.

It's called the annunciation. The angel Gabriel, Israel's special angel, made a visit to Galilee. Galilee was regarded by some, especially in the Jerusalem religious establishment as a backwater. Nathanael asked if

anything good could come out of Nazareth (John 1:46). That low expectation was widely applied and covered the whole region. Yet it was to the backwater that Gabriel was sent, sent as it turns out with high expectations, expectations that were not disappointed.

In Nazareth of Galilee, Israel's special angel visited Mary. He brought her a greeting and an important message. Mary had been singled out by God, singled out for special favor. We don't know why, why Mary and not Martha next door. Yes, Mary was promised in marriage to a descendant of David, but I'm sure David had plenty of descendants. Whatever the reason, Mary was the favored one. And Israel's special angel had an important message for her.

Mary could expect another visitor, Gabriel told her. It would be the Holy Spirit, the powerful presence of God. In some mysterious fashion — the Spirit cannot be pinned down, after all; the Spirit is like the wind, as Jesus said, blowing this way and that. In some mysterious fashion, the Spirit would come upon Mary and overshadow her, and not without result. Mary would conceive a child, a son! A son who would be Israel's eternal king. That was the good part.

The bad part was that Mary would conceive a child. It was not the right time in Mary's life for that to happen. She was promised in marriage, as good as married, to Joseph, married in every way except for sharing a home and a bed. What would Joseph do when he found out, and he would find out — what would Joseph do when he found out that Mary was knocked up? No doubt Mary pondered all these things in her heart. It was quite the annunciation, quite the announcement. Good for Israel. Very good for Israel. Not so good for Mary.

Yet Mary embraced the news, even with its potential, personal cost. Her words are powerful, laden with significance: "You see, the servant of the Lord. May it happen to me as you have said." With those words — humble words, selfless words, faithful words, obedient words — with those words, Mary welcomed the mysterious presence. With those words, Mary surrendered her heart, her will, and her body to God. With those words, Mary accepted whatever glory or shame would be hers. With those words, Mary became a partner with the Holy Spirit in the unfolding of the Kingdom of God.

Elizabeth, Mary's relative, identifies the heart of the matter. Mary, she said, has trusted that what was spoken to her from the Lord will be accomplished. Trusted not just that somehow, mysteriously, she would conceive a child. But trusted that her child — again, no matter what glory or shame would be Mary's — trusted that her child would be king over Israel, king forever. In other words, she trusted that God at last, through her, through her mysteriously conceived son, was completing his old, old promises to Abraham.

This is faith: not just just believing in God, that God exists, but believing God, trusting God's promises, promises fulfilled and promises pending, trusting enough to put everything at risk: your self, your future, everything.

And so Mary is a model of faith for the church and for every child of God. A model, a seemingly simple model. Trust God. Trust what God promises, what God intends, what God requires. Trust God, and give yourself to God in love, in submission, in obedience.

Of course, Mary had it easy, didn't she? Sure, she had to embrace potential trouble and shame. But at least she knew exactly what God was asking of her. That hardly ever happens for us. Hardly? Never! When people start hearing from God, we run for cover. These days anyone who did what Abraham did with Isaac would be locked up, no matter how he protested about doing God's will. We don't expect God to speak directly to us, to guide our faith and obedience that way. And God does not speak directly to us. But if God did speak to us and tell us what to do, we would obey. Right?

I think it's more complex than that. Certainly we don't have a constant flow of direct instruction from God. God is not a satellite navigation system, telling us every turn to make and every time we mess up giving us a new set of complete directions. No. Faith and obedience for us involve a fair bit of guesswork. Yet sometimes, probably more often than we care to admit, we do know what God wants us to do.

Around the BREAD organization, people are always quoting Micah 6:8 about doing justice. But the whole set of verses there in Micah 6 is instructive for today's purposes. "What should I offer to God?" That's the question. "What should I offer to God? I'm not sure what God wants. A burnt offering of a thousand rams? Rivers and rivers of olive oil? Is that what God wants from me, something expensive like that? How

about my own child, my firstborn? How about I do what Abraham almost did? Is that what God wants from me?" That's the question. And here's the answer: "He has told you. He has told you what's good. He has told you what's required. You already know. Just do it!"

Are we as ignorant of God's will for us as we sometimes tell ourselves we are, protesting the lack of a sign or a clear signal from God, when we already know? Say I have a spare \$150. I may think about buying a new "stompbox" for my electric guitar, even though I don't need one. Another option would be to send the money to the Open Door and Next Door ministry in Kalamazoo, Michigan, a ministry that helps vulnerable people get on their feet and take their place in society. Well, don't I know what God wants me to do with my \$150? Isn't it less a question of knowing what God wants than of wanting what God wants? That's sure how it is for me.

I know you can supply your own examples. Times in the past when you knew what God wanted but you didn't want what God wanted. Times in the past — and maybe you have an example right now, something that's haunting you because you know what God wants. And none of the excuses you've tried have worked, none of the attempts to forget what you know, what you know better than you want to. You know what God wants, but you don't want it yourself. And you're ready to turn your back.

Mary could have turned her back. Maybe she was the fourth virgin that Gabriel visited. Maybe the virgin Sarah and the virgin Rachel and the virgin Abigail all said, "No!" before Gabriel visited Mary. Mary could have said, "No!" But she said, "Yes." She decided in faith to want what God wanted, whatever the price. And Mary would pay a price. A sword would pierce her soul (Luke 2:35). You and I? We'll turn our backs because of inconvenience. We'll turn our backs because we have other plans, plans for the evening or plans for our lives. But Mary is our model, as is everyone who makes herself a servant of God's will.

Advent, the patient season, is nearly over. The time is upon us, the time for us to welcome the Lord. For you, for me, for the church, the time has come. Time to do what we know. Time to put ourselves and what we treasure at risk. Time to trust God enough to welcome and to serve what God wants, and to learn in time to want it, too.