

Sermon - December 18, 2011

Year B - The Year of Mark - Advent 4

2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16; Luke 1:46b-55; Romans 16: 25-27; Luke 1: 26-38

The angel Gabriel appears to Mary in the town of Nazareth. He has arrived to announce to her that she has been chosen to give birth to the Messiah. Of course, this part we know. We begin learning this part of the story from the time we are children. However, today we are going to look at another part of the story. This part may not be as familiar because it is hidden within the text; it is Mary's response, a surprise to consider in light of Advent.

Gabriel arrives, he tells Mary she will give birth. Then, there is a pause as Mary ponders what has been said. Consider this: at that moment, the whole future of creation hung on the answer of a young girl. It is true; Mary was not a robot. She was not a machine that would only give affirmative responses to God. She had free will. She could have refused. In fact, that is the whole point. God gives us freedom, and with freedom, there is always risk. Luther once said that the miracle in this story is that Mary said, "Yes."

Imagine all the angels gathered around, looking down, holding their collective breath. "What will she say? Will Mary, say yes?" The angels all know how God works; it is by allowing people to be free, and to freely to answer "yes." If it comes from coercion, love means nothing. It is only when love is freely given that it has meaning.

Freedom of choice, the exercise of free will, has always been at the top of God's priority list when it comes to us humans. God would never force a "yes" from anyone. He would never trick anyone into a response of love. God would never make obedience the best choice if people did not truly have the option of disobedience as well.

That is the way God has been from the beginning. Think of Adam and Eve; they had a choice. Think of Abraham and Sarah; they had a choice. God would even allow people to continue in their own disobedience. He would permit them to have their own ideas on how to make their own way, or to find themselves in the prison of their own designs, and even "hit bottom," if only to give them a firm place from which to say, "Yes. Your will be done."

God respects our freedom. He has, since the days in the garden. However, even though he respects our freedom, he does not abandon us. That is why God gave the Ten Commandments, called Abraham, or sent the prophets. Now, there is this moment, when an angel stands before Mary, answering her questions, as he and the entire angelic host wait. Will she do it? Will she say, "Yes"?

We know the answer Mary gave: "Here am I, the servant of the Lord. Let it be with me according to your word."

Here am I, the servant of the Lord. With this answer, all the heavens rejoice, and the plan is set in motion that would cause a new light to shine in the darkness, new hope, new peace, new freedom, and new life. Mary's answer gives words for us too. These words change everything.

During Advent, we hear about preparing for the coming of the Lord, how to become more and more the disciple – the follower of Christ – we are called to be. We hear about Advent's gifts to us: a time for self-examination, a time for repentance, for turning away from things, ways of life, and behavior that keep us from hearing that voice calling in the wilderness, or from seeing our God who is rushing to meet us. Today, on the Fourth Sunday, Advent's gift is the gift of commitment, commitment to God, church, and commitment to offer ourselves as servants of God. Today is about being like Mary and saying our own "Yes, Here am I, the servant of the Lord."

Mary was not the first to say these words. She stands in a long line of witnesses who have been faithful enough to say to God's request, "Here am I." To say, "Here I am," to God is to take a risk.

Noah said, "Here am I," and God told him to build an ark in the middle of a desert. His neighbors laughed at him and mocked him for his foolishness.

Abram said, "Here am I," and God told him to get his wife, pack his things, and go sight unseen to a land God would show him.

The boy Samuel said, "Here am I," and then began a long career of speaking God's truth to the powers of the day, and King Saul in particular. Samuel became the bearer of the unpleasant news that Saul had done wrong in God's sight. Samuel said, "Yes," to God's call and faced the risk that such freedom can bring.

Then, there is Mary, this young woman who ponders, asks, and wonders. Then, she says the words that change everything, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord."

She would give birth to Jesus, the one who would be obedient even unto death. In doing so, he would become the way of life. The name of Mary's baby was Jesus. In Hebrew, his name means, "Yahweh or 'God' frees." God brings freedom.

When we are willing to serve God, and do what he asks of us, we can stop asking, "What is in it for me? How does this help me? What recognition can I get out of it?" It is then that we will know freedom.

When we are freed from all attempts to be self-important and self-serving, we can be truly freed – freed for God's purpose and God's meaning.

When we present ourselves as God's servants, and are open to God's call, we take our places with the line of faithful people who have risked God's call. We will find ourselves set free. With freedom comes risk. However, God is with us in the risk we take. We will be ready for the adventures God has in store for us, for the work God needs us to do, and the work God has designed us, uniquely, to do.

There in is the beauty of it. Even though you may never have thought about what God is asking of you, it does not mean that God has not been preparing each of us to do it.

The truth is that like Mary, the angels are holding their breath to hear your answer when God calls you with a task. Maybe you do not hear them, but the heavenly hosts are singing, "Alleluia," when you say, freely, "Yes."

God, the Church, and the heavenly host are calling. Like Mary, all we need to do is say, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord." Amen.