

ADVENT 4

Year B

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During Advent and Christmas, we will be using study prompts and other activities tied to the sermon for the week. Read the sermon aloud and follow-up with spoken responses to the two questions at the end. Find our full sermon compilation for individual, small group, or congregational use, *Sermons for Advent and Christmas 2023* at www.sermonsthatwork.org.

Like Mary

[RCL] 2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16; Canticle 3 or Canticle 15 or Psalm 89:1-4, 19-26; Romans 16:25-27; Luke 1:26-38

Our Gospel lesson is wonderful and glorious and brings us to the edge of Christmas. It is the story of the Annunciation. The angel Gabriel is sent by God to the town of Nazareth, to a virgin whose name was Mary. For many of us, feathery images fill the mind's eye. The angel Gabriel bows to greet Mary, his multicolored wings still unfurled from flight. He straightens up, and with lily in left hand raises his right, indicating the momentous announcement: "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you."

In our Gospel, Gabriel explains: "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." This is good news! By the power of the Holy Spirit, Mary will conceive a son, and he will be named Jesus and he will be called the Son of the Most High. An

angelic message, Gabriel's announcement, the Annunciation of the birth of our Lord!

Given the peculiarities of our calendar, today we have the one-in-seven-year event of the Fourth Sunday of Advent falling on the same day as Christmas Eve. The temptation for the preacher this morning is to wrap things up with a quick *amen*, and an invitation to come back this evening to hear the rest of the story at our Christmas Eve services. After all, there are altar guilds waiting in the wings, eager to transform our sanctuaries from Advent austerity to Christmas splendor in just a few short hours. And they may very well be thinking: *If the preacher has the nerve to insist that we wait to prepare the church for Christmas until the services for the Fourth Sunday of Advent are over, the least [he] could do is to keep the sermon short!*

There is, of course, wisdom here, not only in always listening to the altar guild but also about keeping sermons short. Yet, Mary's response to Gabriel has much to say about Christian faith that we ought to notice before rushing to the manger. In Luke 11:27, a woman in a crowd following Jesus shouts, "Blessed is the womb that bore you and the breasts that nursed you." To which, Jesus responds, "Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and respond" (11:28). Jesus doesn't simply negate the woman's statement about Mary. She isn't altogether wrong. But he does amend what she says. The important thing about Mary isn't simply that she gave birth to Jesus, but rather that she heard the word of God and responded in faith. Mary may rightly be seen as *Theotokos*, the God-bearer, because she gave birth to Jesus. But it is her response to the word of God that makes Mary the model of Christian discipleship.

The first thing to notice is that after Gabriel delivers his message, Mary says, "How can this

be?” Now, on the one hand, this is a very understandable question. We have been told Mary was not married, that she was a virgin. How, then, is she going to have a baby? Good question.

But, on the other hand, think for a moment about the Annunciation. The angel Gabriel, in all his feathery glory, appears to Mary and announces that she will conceive and bear a son. Surely, in this case, the messenger has to be considered. No less than an archangel with a direct message from God appears to Mary. If the history of art has anything to tell us, the Annunciation must have been one of the top-ten religious experiences of all time. So, perhaps, some of us would be forgiven for thinking: What more do you want? After all, who among us hasn't at some time asked the Lord for a sign? And if, in response to this request, we received an appearance from say, the archangel Gabriel, with a pretty clear message, well, who really wouldn't be satisfied with that? Truthfully, the appearance of an angel, any run-of-the-mill angel, would pretty much settle it for most of us.

Not so for Mary. Rather, Mary says, “Umm, excuse me, but how can this be? Remember, I'm not married?” To which, amazingly, the angel Gabriel does not respond by saying, “Well, excuse me missy, but let me remind you that I am an archangel. I stand in the very presence of God. So you are just going to have to take my word for it.” Which is how, perhaps, some of us would respond if we stood in Gabriel's sandals. But no, Gabriel is a real angel, and so he explains to Mary how this will all take place. The Holy Spirit will come upon her and the power of the Most High will overshadow her.

That the angel Gabriel takes seriously the question of the teenaged Mary and responds tenderly is gracious. That Mary has the courage to ask the question in the first place is inspiring. It shows genuine faith. God does not overpower us with the full weight of heavenly glory to compel us to believe and to act in faith. What the angel says is not entirely clear to Mary and God honors her question. God invites Mary's assent. So, when she finally says, “Here am I, the servant of the

Lord, let it be with me according to your word,” Mary is the model of Christian faith. Blessed are those who hear the word of God and respond like Mary. With wonder and questions and faithful assent.

Also note, Gabriel sends Mary to see her kinswoman, Elizabeth, whose own extraordinary pregnancy will be a sign of the truth of his message. Again, Gabriel could have pulled archangelic rank. But instead, he invites Mary to check out the message with another flesh-and-blood human. Here again, Mary is a model of discipleship. We can't do it alone. God doesn't expect us to do it alone. Mary doesn't just talk with angels. She visits Elizabeth. She helps Jesus along with his first miracle at the wedding at Cana. She stands with the beloved disciple at the foot of the cross. She gathers with the disciples in the upper room awaiting the coming of the Holy Spirit. Mary is the model of discipleship among the disciples. God gives us families and church families to help along the way. Mary, the Mother of our Lord, was sent to her cousin to be strengthened in her understanding of God's message. Blessed are those who hear the word of God and respond like Mary.

This is the last Sunday of Advent. Tonight, this sanctuary will be transformed and we will celebrate the feast of the Incarnation. But before we sing, “O Come All Ye Faithful,” let's remember the faith of Mary. Marvel again at the angelic message that Mary will bear a son and name him Jesus and he will be called the Son of the Most High. Wonder with her how this can be. See the gracious sign in a pregnant kinswoman. And hear the heavens rejoice when Mary finally says, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord, let it be with me according to your word.” Blessed are those who hear the word of God and respond like Mary.

Prompts

1. At the Annunciation, Mary responds with questions and ultimately with faith-filled assent. How do you relate to Mary's questioning and her eventual response to the angel's message? How can we learn from Mary's faith in our own moments of uncertainty or doubt?

2. Find a favorite depiction of the Annunciation and reflect on how it moves your spirit. You might consider viewing pieces by Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Plautilla Nelli, Sandro Botticelli, Henry Tanner, or John Collier.