

December 24, 2017
The Fourth Sunday of Advent

“Whatever”
by Mary Anne Biggs

Romans 16:25-27 ~ Luke 1:26-38

Today’s lectionary text from the Gospel of Luke is the Annunciation story ... when the angel Gabriel visited Mary. The Annunciation was a favorite subject for the classical artists of the Renaissance. They portray Mary as a beautiful young woman ... say twenty-five ... dressed like a nun ... or maybe the daughter of a wealthy patron of the arts. Numerous paintings exquisitely depict the angel's appearance to Mary while she is cloistered in prayer in a chapel ... her breviary (or prayer book) open before her. But Mary wasn't Catholic, of course ... she was Jewish. And she wasn't wealthy ... she came from the lower class. She wasn't even a young adult ... she was a teenager! A teenager! According to New Testament scholars, Mary would have been twelve to fourteen years old when the angel Gabriel appeared to her. That's pretty young to be asked to carry the salvation of the world.

I was seven when I graduated from the ranks of lambs and angels to play Mary for the first time in my church Christmas pageant. I remember feeling quite grown-up as I donned my costume ... a light blue gown and white head scarf. I remember practicing my lines for days beforehand: "Behold I am the handmaiden of the Lord. Let it be with me according to your word." I remember laughing when Gabriel ... finding his cardboard wings irksome ... tore them clean off his shoulders during dress rehearsal.

For all the chaos of those childhood performances, there was something straightforward to me back then about Mary. Kneeling on stage ... with my head demurely covered ... and my eyes glued on Gabriel's glittery halo ... I didn't think much about what the Annunciation must have cost her. Her decision to say yes to God seemed unremarkable to me ... her obedience easy. How times have changed. At this stage in my faith journey, nothing about Mary feels straightforward or easy.

So now, I imagine that the Annunciation may have happened another way than the classical artists pictured. Read between the lines of the sanctified gospel story and you hear a frightened, even resistant adolescent. I mean, imagine going about your business in the middle of the day when a radiant broad-winged six-foot seraph appears to you. *"Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you!"* "Whassup?" Mary greets the angel in return ... keeping up a brave face, but scared to the core. *"Fear not, Mary: for you have found favor with God. And, behold, you shall conceive in your womb, and bring forth a son, and shall call his name Jesus. He shall be great, and shall be called the Son of the Highest: and the Lord God shall give unto him the throne of his father David: And he shall reign over the house of Jacob forever; and of his kingdom there shall be no end."*

Mary blinks. This doesn't sound like any "favor" to her. What Mary wants is for this angel to pick on somebody else. What Mary sees is trouble ahead. What Mary feels is distress. This can't possibly be true! So now Gabriel gives her the news: *"The Holy Ghost shall come upon you, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow you: therefore, also that holy thing which shall be born of you shall be called the Son of God. And, behold, your cousin Elizabeth has also conceived a son in her old age: and this is the sixth month with her, who was called barren. For with God nothing shall be impossible."*

Does Mary have a choice? God has picked her ... we aren't told why. Mary can say no ... because God does not coerce human cooperation. Mary can resist, because God withdraws Divine sovereignty from the human arena enough to allow us room for genuinely free will. Mary has a choice. But this God-given freedom creates the most incredibly profound moment in all of human history. Suddenly, right there ... right then ... the whole destiny of the human species hangs in the balance. No wonder Katherine Buechner depicts the angel Gabriel standing before Mary with his fingers crossed behind his back. What if she says no?

She has every reason to say no. She has plans. She is betrothed to the carpenter Joseph. Under the law of that time, "betrothal" means the marriage has been arranged, and she is considered already legally married. Only, they have not been together alone. She remains in her parent's home until she is mature enough to be Joseph's partner ... to bear his children ... to manage his household ... to be his wife. This is her future. She will be respectable ... if not powerful. She will be secure ... if not wealthy. She will be content ... if not happy. She will follow in the footsteps of her mother ... and her mother's mother ... and every Jewish wife and mother ... all the way back to Sarah.

Now this winged wonder comes in with a wrecking ball to that dream, and says, "You're going to have a baby, and your baby will be the Messiah." Mary doesn't even know it will mean a broken heart. She doesn't even know it will mean standing beside his cross. But she does know that it doesn't sound like good news for her. How is she going to tell Joseph? How is she going to tell her parents? Who will believe her? What will people say?

Mary answers. Oh, I know the sanctified biblical language has her say *"Here am I, the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to thy word."* But can you truly imagine a teenager ... of any time ... actually talking like that? Read between the lines. Think of the real Mary ... the teenager caught off guard by the appearance ... and then the announcement of this angel ... his exalted language ... his incredible message ... and his attempt to assert authority over her. What would any normal teenager say?

I can hear Mary now: *"Whatever?!"* Maybe she just wants to get past this strange encounter and have some time to figure it all out. Maybe it's too much to take in all at once ... and she has to see if it can possibly be true. Maybe she is willing to agree for now ... because she mostly trusts God ... but she still isn't happy about this. She acquiesces ... not knowing the full meaning of her decision to follow the will of God. Whoever does?

Oh, occasionally, God acts unilaterally and directly ... fire from heaven ... water from a rock ... an earthquake prison break. But more often than not ... according to the Bible ... God partners

with people. God answers our prayers through somebody else. God is with us in each other. God relies on human agency to accomplish the Divine design. We can't do it without God ... but God *chooses not* to do it without us.

God's call comes in many and various ways. It usually arrives wrapped in some opportunity ... some moment of crisis ... or need ... or pregnant possibility. It is often surprising ... unexpected ... as we move routinely about our daily drudge. It may come through an angel, or an inner realization, a heightened awareness, or maybe even a habitual pattern. But in those special moments ... when we realize God is calling us ... we have an opportunity to bear the love of God in this world ... to carry God's salvation to another person ... to comfort ... to sustain ... to support ... to assist ... to encourage ... to confront ... to redeem someone for the good. By God's presence in you ... you can change somebody else's life for the better ... and your life will be changed for the better, too.

Resistance is our first response. We don't want the trouble. We don't want the change. Better the familiar, if boring rut, to the unknown adventure we are offered by a God who is always dangerous to our pre-arranged plans. We think of a hundred excuses ... a thousand reasons why it's just impossible.

I will not say God coerces. But God insists. God loses the excuses in one swoop. As the angel said: *"For with God nothing shall be impossible."* So, we are reduced to a plain-and-simple ... yes-or-no choice ... "maybe later" is a "no" answer because of the time-sensitive nature of the call. I will not say that those who submit have it easy. In fact, sometimes they have it hard ... harder than others precisely because they have chosen to follow the will of God. We all know, doing what is right is usually harder than doing what is wrong ... or just doing nothing at all. But doing what is right pays off in the end ... and is easier than living with the long-term consequences of doing the wrong.

The Bible says Mary had her doubts later on. Jesus was teaching and she sent her other children to fetch him home. Mary wasn't always perfect in her obedience ... she didn't always understand what God wanted from her ... sometimes she even opposed what God was doing because she didn't understand.

And that's good news for us ... because we aren't *any* of us perfect ... in our obedience to God either. So, don't feel badly if doing God's love work doesn't come easily or naturally for you. What counts finally is faithfulness. What matters ultimately is doing the right thing ... even if you feel a lot of ambivalence about it. Mary may have been confused, resistant, even oppositional to Jesus at times. But she was there for him at the cross. Unlike most of his disciples ... particularly the men ... Mary stayed with him all the way to the cross.

What Paul calls "the obedience of faith" is not a straight line of perfect compliance. It is more like a faltering following ... a "whatever!" submission to the surprising God. But if you follow... if you say yes when God's call comes to you in those moments of pregnant possibility ... then God comes to this sorry world through you, and all of us are blessed.

That is God's call to you today, just as it was God's call to Mary. I'm just another Gabriel sent to deliver the invitation. That's right. God is calling, you! What do you say?

May we pray?

God of life, Lord of love, come again into our world, come among us, come through us, call us to be your servants, your agents, your entry point. And we will say, "Whatever! Whatever you want, O God. Wherever you send us. However, you would use us to love your children." We wait and watch for you again. Please come soon. Amen.