

Perfect for the Part!
Advent 4, December 18th, 2011

I never liked it in neighborhood games when I was growing up when captains were picked and kids stood against a fence and waited to be picked. And you got picked earlier if you were strong, or fast, or somehow a valuable commodity. And even if I got picked early on for whatever reason, I felt sorry for the kids who got picked last. We had a competition in confirmation the other night, and I said we needed two teams, but I didn't give directions. And all of a sudden we had team captains and kids were being picked first and second and third and last, and I won't let that happen again.

We have the story today of a young girl who probably would have been picked last when it comes to people we might think God would use for the most important job in the world.

Mary was young, probably 13 or 14, a girl in a patriarchal society, living in a backwater town (you remember Nathanael in John chapter 1: Can anything good come out of Nazareth?) She didn't live in the big city, she was living her life quietly, she was engaged to be married to a local man who was a carpenter. This marriage had been arranged since she was a little girl.

When it comes to who God needs for the team, *we* might think, God, why are you picking Mary?

The angel Gabriel had picked somebody else for the team earlier, somebody who was a safer pick. Earlier God had sent Gabriel to a religious couple, righteous people, a pastor and his wife, for Pete's sake, a priest named Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth. Those are people you might pick first for the team. Luke says delicately that Zechariah and Elizabeth were both "getting on in years." She was past the age of childbearing. So maybe this wasn't such a safe bet.

And yet Gabriel says to this couple, You will bear a child named John, who will prepare the people to receive the Lord. So Elizabeth becomes pregnant, and stays in seclusion for five months. That's all background for today's Gospel, which begins "in the sixth month," meaning of Elizabeth's pregnancy. And where had the angel Gabriel visited Zechariah to tell him he and Elizabeth were going to be parents? In the temple, when he was

performing his priestly duties. Pretty important job. You might have picked those people first, if you're Team Captain Gabriel.

But now Gabriel leaves the city and goes to a more rural setting, where cell phone reception is spotty and they've just got a Target and a Bi-Mart. He gets sent to the town of Nazareth up in Galilee. Galilee, remember, was considered suspicious by the religious people in the city because Gentiles had intermarried with the Jews there. And Galileans didn't get down to the temple in Jerusalem for sacrifices very often, so it's interesting that God sends Gabriel up to Galilee. Again, if we were picking teams, Mary, who lives in Galilee, would be left standing at the fence.

Gabriel comes to Mary and says these words: Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you. And what is Mary's response? "But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be." (Luke 1:29) In today's language, Mary might have said, What? You talkin' to me? Why would the Lord be with me in any special way? I live up here in the sticks. I'm just minding my own business, going to get married after this engagement of a year, Joseph seems like a good man, we'll have kids, he'll make furniture in the shop....Why are you visiting *me*?

Luke says Mary was perplexed and she *pondered*. Remember Mary *ponders* the words of the shepherds later in Luke chapter 2. Mary treasured these words and pondered them in her heart. (2: 19) But the Greek word for *ponder* is different in this first usage. It means something more like debate, or reason out, or consider. Mary was perplexed and needed to ponder, to reason out, maybe even to host a debate in her head. I don't understand this! Why are you coming to me? Why would I be favored?

A little later in this story, after Gabriel explains that she will bear the Son of the Most High, Mary says, How can this be, since I am a virgin? I appreciate this about Mary: she is somebody willing to say, Hang on! I don't get this! I don't understand why you're coming to me! And I don't understand how all of this is going to work!

It seems to me that Mary is telling us that it's OK to say that. Something gets thrown our way in life, and it's OK to ponder, to debate with God, to reason it out. God, what's going on? Why this? Why now? I don't understand! Mary, the Mother of God, ponders and says, I don't get it. How can this be?

So the angel explains the best he can. He assumes, with Mary perplexed and pondering, and he being an angel and everything, that she might be a little fearful. So he says, Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. If God favors us, we usually think blessing, don't we? We think social standing, wealth, good health. But the angel explains how the favored status will work: 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."

So Mary is favored by God, she will be blessed by God. And will Mary receive social standing or wealth or good health, those kinds of blessings? Well, Mary will bear a child out of wedlock, with suspicions about who the father is, and a raise a son who will be executed as a criminal. That's the blessing.

You know, a blessing doesn't always feel like a blessing. And sometimes we only see in the rear view mirror that we were given something that turned out to be for the good.

How do we respond when God wants to be born in us? Well, God, you can be born in me...as long as I don't have to change too much. God, you can be born in me, as long as I can hang onto these old resentments, as long as I don't have to forgive that person, as long as I can do what I want with my time and talents and treasure. God, you can be born in me, as long as I can still hold onto this little area that I need to control.

A young single mother with a little boy was once talking with a friend, and she said, You know, I'm afraid to tell God- "Your will be done in my life." I'm afraid God would take away my little boy, or some other huge burden would come into my life. I'm afraid to say: Your will be done.

Her Christian friend said: What would you say if your little boy came to you and said, Mom, I want to be everything you want me to be today. I want to do everything you want me to do today. Would you say, Ah, hah! Now I'm going to take away all of those things he loves and make him do all those things he hates. And the mother said, No, I'd give him the best day I possibly could.

And the friend said, Don't you think God wants the best for you too? Mary couldn't possibly see how all of this was going to turn out, but the angel said, Mary, God has favored you. You are going to bless the world through bearing God's Son.

Now Mary hears these amazing words and she's got a question that I alluded to earlier: How can this be, since I am a virgin? Again, it's OK to question God. It's OK to say, God, I don't get it. You can fill in the blank: I don't get the timing, I don't get your silence, I don't get this illness, I don't get this situation, I don't get it. It's OK to say that.

And so Mary gets an answer, but it's still a mystery, isn't it? The angel explains: "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God."

There are scholars, by the way, who don't believe that the virgin birth really happened. And we should really call it a virgin conception. They would say it serves a theological purpose for the Gospel writers. The Gospel writers Matthew and Luke want to say Jesus is special, so they create this story about God being the Father of the child. After all, the Roman emperor was called the son of the gods, so why wouldn't this special person Jesus be the son of God? That was the way for Luke to say, *Jesus* is Son of God, not the Roman emperor, who claimed to be.

And remember, only Matthew and Luke talk about a virgin conception. Paul doesn't speak about it, although he names Jesus as the Son of God. Paul doesn't say you need to believe in it for faith. Jesus' death on the cross and resurrection, yes, but not a special birth. It isn't mentioned anywhere else in the New Testament.

The way I respond to those arguments is to say that if God is active in the world, if God is present already in all of creation, and God found it appropriate to work in that way, who am I to question it? I believe in the resurrection of Jesus, why not God working in Mary in a special way? And when Mary asks the question: How can this be? the angel finally says- For nothing will be impossible with God.

Gabriel says, Mary, God can work in ways that you can't imagine. And God wants to use you to accomplish God's plans.

Mary, who has been perplexed, and who has pondered, and who has asked questions, now says, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word."

Remember this story is called The Annunciation, or the *Announcement* that God will use Mary to bring God's Son into the world. This isn't called The Request, or The Invitation, but The Annunciation. Mary doesn't seem to be given a choice here, does she? But on the other hand, we have a choice as to how we will respond to everything that comes our way in life.

Mary had a choice as to how she would accept this news. She could willingly say, Yes, Lord, or she could say no, and defend herself the best she could. We get all kinds of things thrown at us in this life, and we have a choice as to how we will receive them. We can tell whatever story we want to tell about the things that happen to us: I'm a victim. My parents didn't love me enough. Life is unfair. The deck is stacked against me. We can frame it however we want to.

How does Mary frame it? She may have thought, I wouldn't have chosen this. I had my life planned out. But God, you've got a bigger purpose for me. Here I am. Let it be to me according to your word. Mary decides to trust that it will be OK, that God's presence is with her and in her to accomplish God's purposes.

William Least Heat Moon has a book about his trip across America called *Blue Highways*. He tells the story of two boys who have gone fishing for the day and stay too long. Since it is almost dark, they take a shortcut to get back home, along a railroad track that crosses four deep gorges on wooden trestle bridges.

As they are crossing the last gorge, a locomotive appears out of the distance, coming towards them. There is no walkway, and they realize they can't outrun the train, so they slip down under the railroad ties and hang on while the train rumbles over them. After the train passes, the boys are too weak to pull themselves up to the top of the tracks, and so they hang there in the darkness. They are afraid to let go, because they don't know what's down in the darkness.

They call for help, and after a little while a man shines a flashlight on them. What are you boys doing? he asks. He is standing in a marsh a few feet from them. Their feet are only dangling ten inches above the ground, but they don't know it.

What a great picture of the life of faith. We get in situations in life when the train is coming towards us, and we dive for cover. And we ask, God. Where are you? And we're afraid to let go and trust, because we don't know what might happen. And we learn from Mary's response: Lord, I might not understand how you're going to work in this situation, but let it be to me according to your word. I know that underneath me are your everlasting arms.

Barbara Brown Taylor is one of my favorite preachers. She quotes the German mystic Meister Eckhart in a sermon about this passage: "We are all meant to be mothers of God. What good is it to me if this eternal birth of the divine Son takes place unceasingly but does not take place within myself? And, what good is it to me if Mary is full of grace if I am not also full of grace? What good is it to me for the Creator to give birth to his Son if I do not also give birth to him in my time and my culture? Then, then, is the fullness of time: When the Son of God is begotten in us." Amen. (Meister Eckhart, quoted by Barbara Brown Taylor in her sermon, "Mothers of God" in *Gospel Medicine*).