

Fourth Advent – Year B - December 21, 2008
2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16; Psalm 89:1-4, 19-26; Romans 16:25-27; Luke 1:26-38
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In a soft soothing voice, we hear the questions filter through the loud speakers, broadcasting into all public areas and perhaps even into our homes as well. “Does life sometimes leave you feeling perplexed and confused? Are you troubled by what you see and hear around you?” It might be a futuristic world, something imagined by Stephen King, or George Orwell. Or it might be the year 2120 and we are listening in to a revolutionary government advert for the latest in better living through chemistry. That is otherwise known as power and control by the enforced use of mind-altering drugs. On the other hand, it may be some interesting entrepreneurial opportunity to escape from the world by buying our own remote desert islands. Many authors and filmmakers have enjoyed great license in pondering what the future might hold, and in trying to explain the inexplicable.

For more than a thousand years, Christians everywhere have delighted in hearing the story of Mary and the Angel Gabriel. You are, no doubt, aware of the multitude of theories that seek to explain or, perhaps more precisely, explain away, the probability that we are reading and hearing God’s truth, as shared by the only person who knows what really happened – Mary herself. For some of us – some, not all -- the whole prospect of accepting that God intervened in human affairs with the explicit permission of a twelve or thirteen year-old Middle Eastern peasant girl is deeply troubling. A lot depends on how we understand the nature of our God. Is God distant or near? When we hear about another devastating hurricane, another murder, or the horrors of war, do we believe that God is all-powerful or not? Is God in control, and if not, who is? Does God know everything about me, about you, about everyone who ever lived, and everyone who is yet to be born? As a human being created in God’s image, what does it really mean to have free will?

The angel went to Mary in Nazareth, told her that she was highly favored, and that the Lord was with her. “Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be.” In her book, *Christianity for the Rest of Us*, Diana Butler Bass tells a story about her good friend Phyllis Tickle. Tickle was speaking at a large southern cathedral, where about five hundred people had come to hear her presentation. Afterwards, during the question and answer period, someone asked what she thought about the Virgin Birth. The discussion became more and more heated, especially around the issue of whether the Virgin Birth was a matter of scientific and historical fact. Way at the back of the room was a seventeen-year-old teenager, one of the volunteers who had helped to set up. Tickle noticed that he had stopped being busy, and had started listening intently to the debate. Afterwards, he came up to her privately and politely addressed her saying, “There’s something I don’t understand.” Tickle was expecting to enter a discussion about the complexities of the issue, but the teenager went on to say, “I don’t understand why everyone is so upset about this. I believe in the Virgin Birth. It is so beautiful that it has just got to be true – whether it happened or not.” In many ways, this young man understood God in the same way that Mary does. They both respond in faith with obedient hearts.

For the rest of us, working through the process of transcending our incultured rationalism and our faith in science helps us to make more sense of who God is and how God works. In order to feel and know the beauty of this miracle in our hearts, some of us first need to get our heads around the basics. In the story so far, we have details of *where* the event took place, and with *whom*. The specific dates of *when* are not quite so clear, but details of who was governor and who was king give us a range of possible years. We even know *what* happens – Mary becomes pregnant, and does give birth to the promised boy-child. Mary helps us by asking the angel *how* all this can possibly be, confirming for the third time in the narrative that she is a virgin, and that this conception will come about through the Holy Spirit, by the power of the Most High God. Must we wait until Jesus begins his ministry or until

He is crucified and resurrected to answer the last question of *why* this happens? Perhaps not!

You see there is a history here of which Mary is a part, as are we all. A history of God getting involved, troubling the waters from the very beginning of creation. A history of God redeeming His people: as the Israelites flee to freedom, the unsettled waters of the Red Sea crash over the pursuing Egyptian army. There is a history of God creating the possibility of life -- opening the barren wombs of Sarah and Elizabeth for example, when all that is earth-bound says it cannot be so. But Mary is different. She is still very young, and engaged to be married. There is certainly no apparent reason to believe that she will not have children by her husband. In choosing Mary to be the God-bearer, God is not overcoming her personal circumstance of need, or removing her shame or blame in not yet having a child. God is telling us that the real need being addressed here is much bigger and more widespread. Mary is the vital link in redeeming the barrenness of God's daughter Israel herself. A barrenness brought about by faithless leaders who are guiding others in the wrong direction. They are effectively hiding the light of God, instead of it letting it shine as a beacon to all nations. The covenant promise of Israel's freedom is not yet fulfilled -- the people are again oppressed and enslaved, this time by Roman forces. God is truly doing a new thing here. Mary, a young virgin, becomes the vessel of God's abundant grace poured out for the whole world. Mary's son Jesus, our Lord and Savior, will show us God's ultimate act of love through His life, death and resurrection, for the salvation of all creation.

Yet, this isn't some heavy-handed divine command. The annunciation holds other important messages for you and me. First of all, it is the promise that God meets us wherever we are. If that is in the pit of despair, then God is there with us. If that is on a cloud of ecstasy, God's joy lifts us to even greater heights. Does it comfort you or disturb you to know that God is with us everywhere we are, and in everything we do? I want to say that it comforts me, but I have to say that, at least sometimes, it disturbs me too. We have arrived safely in the last week of Advent. If we have been taking the messages of Advent to heart, then there are more than a few of us here today who are feeling a little troubled, perplexed, and confused. The events surrounding the birth of Jesus, God incarnate, Son of the Most High, *are* disturbing. God is constantly seeking our receptivity and openness to being stretched and challenged to new growth and new life in Him. And this brings you and me to another new place. One that Mary also stood in. It is a place called decision, response, and partnership, and it stands at the nexus of all possibility, as the lips of time and eternity touch in a kiss. Mary's decision, your decision, my decision, made through the gift of free will, in response to God, determines whether we are willing partners with Him. By God's grace, throughout every moment of our lives, we are standing in that special place, and with God's help, we always have the opportunity to change the world, one decision at a time.

The teenager in our story didn't understand why everyone was so upset. Yet, I think you and I do understand something of what that crowd was dealing with. God disturbs you and me, and there's a part of each of us that doesn't like that one bit. Troubled waters mean a response is necessary. Even if we choose not to answer, in making the decision, God has woken us up, and everything is different. God seeks our partnership in disturbing others, and another part of us shrivels in fear at the very thought of it, forgetting that with God all things are possible. Later, in discussing the story of the teenager in the crowd of people, Tickle told Butler Bass that she felt as if the universe had shifted. "It's a whole new world," she said. Later, Mary said to the angel, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." I, for one, can't read or hear those words without feeling the beauty of faith in action. This is not 2120 and you and I aren't characters in a movie or a book. All we can be sure of is this present moment. God is still speaking softly to your heart and mine. How will we answer?

Amen.