

Text: Luke 1: 26-38

Title: The Gift

Date: December 29, 2009 9am service only

Today is the Fourth Sunday in Advent. Ever since I was a little kid, by the Fourth Sunday in Advent, I wanted to fast forward directly to Christmas morning. I take that back, I have always liked Christmas eve candlelight services. But the Fourth Sunday in Advent? - by now who doesn't know the story of Mary and the Angel Gabriel? We tend to treat the Fourth Sunday in Advent like the valedictorian speeches at our high school graduations. You just knew that the only people in the audience that cared were the parents of the valedictorians. The rest of us just wanted to skip the preliminaries, grab our diplomas and get out of there. There were celebrations to get to! The problem with taking that attitude to the Fourth Sunday of Advent is that we miss the essential wonder and challenge of that most unlikely conversation.

First off, let's admit to ourselves that we overlook Mary as if paying attention to her is somehow "too catholic" for us. As a general rule, Catholics tend to focus on the favor that Mary has found in God's eyes and her obedience. On the other hand, we Protestants tend to focus on the end result -the human birth of the Son of God, the arrival of Jesus Christ on Earth. The real down side to that is that when we fast forward through Mary to focus on Jesus as God's gift to us, we *forget that Jesus is also Mary's gift.*

So put yourself in Mary's shoes: She is looking forward to her wedding when suddenly an angel appears to her. And not just any angel, this is Gabriel, one of the seven archangels who are constantly in God's presence. I don't know about you, but I'd be terrified- no wonder one of the first things he says is do not be afraid!

One of the things that we overlook was that young women in that culture were not directly addressed by anyone who was not a family member. And now she has Gabriel telling her that she is favored by God? Gabriel then goes on to tell her that she will bear the Messiah, not just a Davidic King- But the Son of God Himself!

So of course her first words are, "how can this be?" Favored, are you nuts? What part of favored don't you get? I am in the wrong economic group (poor), wrong

geography, wrong gender, wrong marital status, wrong just about anything else you can think of. Favored? Do you know what that word means?

Almost as if Gabriel can see what she is thinking, he points out that with God, nothing is impossible. "See, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has conceived a son..." Gabriel makes it clear that it will be God who is the creative force here. Mary is not being called to fulfill this birth on her own- she couldn't if she wanted to. Yet the God who created the universe and all that is in it- That Creator can do anything.

She makes her decision. While it is true that she has more than three strikes against her- what she does have going for her is a remarkable faith in God .

Her declaration "Here am I" is a Hebrew expression that means an unhesitating willingness to serve or listen. Mary then describes herself in this context as "the servant of the Lord." More poetic translations of this text have described Mary as the "handmaid of the Lord." But the term Mary uses could be just as correctly translated as "the slave of the Lord."

This startling designation, along with Mary's plea to "let it be with me according to your word" demonstrates her complete, unyielding obedience to God's purposes. Mary gives over the very essence of her being, makes herself into a "slave," out of obedience to God's divine will. From this point on, Mary's life will be lived out in service to God.

This is a gift that keeps on giving. True, Joseph does marry her and Jesus is born in far away Bethlehem. But guess where they return to after fleeing to Egypt? Back to Nazareth, back to the dusty town where everyone would remember that when she got married, she was already pregnant. This was a society that was far less forgiving about unwed teenage mothers than we are. Every day Mary had to know her neighbors would be wondering who the father of Jesus was. Everyone would know that it wasn't Joseph. And Nazareth is too far away from Bethlehem for people to hear of Angels proclaiming Jesus' birth to startled shepherds. In that society, even the suspicion that Jesus may have been illegitimate would be enough to ostracize her. We know that Mary's life would be filled with heartache- her husband would die, her eldest son will be crucified, and she will eventually leave her homeland (oral tradition has it that the Apostle John took her with him to Ephesus. Yet, as far as we know, she never wavered from what

she told Gabriel: "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word" (Luke 1:38).

But of course, we know the rest of the story- we know how everything turned out and we will celebrate that next Thursday & Friday.

In many ways, you and I are not too different than Mary. I've sometimes wondered at what Gabriel thought of the whole thing. Maybe he was shocked by the unlikely choice that Mary was: poor and powerless. I suspect if any of us were God, we would have chosen someone who had better chance of making sure Jesus had enough to eat, had good schools to go to, who could provide a home that was safe and secure. Fact of the matter is, another unlikely choice has been made here. Just as God spoke to Mary through Gabriel, God is speaking to us through the Scriptures.

Most of us are unlikely choices: too old; too young; too much past; not enough future. Yet we have been chosen- our God has a history of making unlikely choices. Comes now our choice. Think of those times when you became aware of God's working in your life, an activity that somehow required you to take action, to make a leap of faith. It could be anything- perhaps going to someone and making amends for a wrong long since past?; maybe modeling by example the kind of person God wants you to be.

This Christmas let's let those around us into the secret of the Christmas spirit. It is not in the giving of things- it is in the giving of ourselves. Know what the real surprise is? When we give of ourselves- we discover, as Mary did, God's transforming gift of Jesus in our own lives.

Let us pray