**2nd December 2012**

**Advent Sunday**

**Luke 1.26-38**

During this advent season we are going to be looking in more depth at the Christmas narrative as told by Luke’s gospel. Our theme is how God comes to us. Today’s readings are about how God comes to Mary.

These two passages from Luke's gospel, held together, provide a way of seeing the world of Mary, the reality of Christmas, the potential for our own spiritual lives. The first verses, 26-38, are traditionally known as the Annunciation; the second portion of scripture is known as the Magnificat. The first is the call of God. The second is the human response.

It is no accident that Mary takes center stage this time of year. Mary is venerated by some Christians, ignored by some Christians, and misunderstood by other Christians. At times Catholics have transformed the peasant Jewish teenage girl into an otherworldly Queen. At times Protestants and Evangelicals have pretended that she never existed, or they have missed the truth that she is the first disciple, that she displays radical faith and trust in God.

Mary hears the call of God and she responds. She models faith, obedience, servanthood, discipleship, hospitality.

The Annunciation is the word of God, through the messenger, to Mary. You have found favor with God. The power of the Holy Spirit will come upon you. You will give birth to the Savior.

Mary asks, "How can this be?"

The angel/messenger said to her, "Nothing will be impossible with God."

The call of God is to an ordinary woman. It is the call to do something extraordinary. Nothing will be impossible with God.

**T**here is a wonderful story about a man who was home with the children one afternoon while his wife went out Christmas shopping. He was reclining on the couch, half sleeping, half watching a football game, when the kids came into the room.

"Dad, we have a play to put on? Do you want to see it?"

He really didn't want to, but he knew he needed to, so he sat up, came out of his slumber, and became a one-man audience.

His four children, four, six, eight, ten years old, were the actors: Mary, Joseph, and the wise men. Joseph came in with a mop handle. Mary came in with a pillowcase under her pajamas; another child was an angel, flapping her arms as wings.

Finally the last child, the eight year old, came out, with all of the jewelry on that she could find in the house, her arms filled with three presents. "I am all three wise men," she said. "I bring three precious gifts: gold, circumstance, and mud."

The father didn't laugh. The father didn't correct the wise man. The father reflected on the word that somehow got to the heart of the Christmas story: God loves us for who we are, our gold--where we are at our best; our circumstances--where we might be even now, even our mud--where we are when we are most human.

God chose an ordinary human being--Mary--to be the vessel through which the Son of God would be born. What is impossible for us is possible with God. God can take our gold, our circumstance, our mud, and do something glorious with it.

This is the Annunciation, the disruptive call of God, for Mary, and, who knows, perhaps for you and me.

Few people imagine God to be an active character in the story of their lives. It's not that people don't believe in God. It's more that, day in and day out, God seems to most of people as fairly passive; you know, that if God is doing anything, it's pretty much hanging out in the background, watching, waiting, being supportive, encouraging. Kind of like the refrain of the Bette Midler song of a few years back, that Cliff Richard did a cover of, "God is watching us, God is watching us, God is watching us...from a distance."

That's not, of course, the biblical picture of God. Sure, God watches. But God also gets involved - God *does* things, all kinds of things -- great and small, mighty, mundane, or miraculous, God is constantly at *work*. More than that, God regularly uses other people to point out and tell about what God is doing.

Take today's Gospel reading, for instance, where the angel Gabriel bursts unexpectedly into the life of an unsuspecting teenage girl named Mary to tell her that she has found favour of God and will conceive, carry, and bear the Son of God. Whew -- talk about news!

Mary is, by turns, perplexed, confused and perhaps troubled by the angel's words. And how could she not be? She is, as she protests, still a virgin. Morever, she is common, ordinary, of little account in her world and definitely not the stuff of legends...and she knows it. Only after expressing her wonder and dismay, and then hearing again Gabriel's affirmation and promise, does she manage to summon the courage to believe that God has indeed favoring her by working in her and through her for the health of the world.

We can all feel out of our depth. I often feel out of my depth. I pinch myself to believe that I’m a minister sometimes. I don’t feel very holy, or wise. I feel most of the times that I’m bumbling through. Some of you may have spotted that. I guess I’m relieved that god chose someone ordinary like Mary.

I remember going out with a girl once who had just graduated from Oxford University with a first class honours in music. She was a brilliant musician and played in an O4chestra and was a youth worker for the church that I found myself attending, partly because she was there. I know nothing about music, and having not been to Oxbridge University I felt a bit inferior. I bought a book - Music for dummies – how to bluff your way through classical music. My friends were having a good laugh at my expense on this one. The relationship didn’t last long – thankfully.

There are times when we can all feel out of our depth.

Mary is innocence in encounter with God through the angel Gabriel. But look how that coming to Mary that annunciation happens and how she responds:

**It unfolds in five stages for Mary**:

1. Comfort. “Do not be afraid.”
2. Assurance. “You have found favour with God,”
3. Annunciation of the plan. “You are going to conceive and birth a God-child”
4. Questioning doubt. “How can this be?”
5. Agreement to partnership. “Let it be with me according to your word.”

It strikes me that this process is archetypal for us who are invited into the Divine Drama, the Kingdom of God.

We begin by experiencing the **comfort of God** when God shows up disguised as our life. In the dark night, the fearful storm, the empty wilderness, God shows up and Consoles us. “Do not be afraid”. God may show up through the company of a friend or stranger – reassuring us when we are anxious or fearful - ‘do not be afraid’. God may show up in a sudden change of feeling – something comes over us – we are open to the Holy Spirit giving us that deep peace of God that passes understanding.

The next step in the process is the **Assurance** that whatever has happened, is happening now, and is going to happen, is all in the presence and providence of God. We all have found favour with God, we know the favour because we sense our part of the plan. The worst hell possible to a human being is not to know that there is a favourable destiny to our lives. We may be going through some trials in life. But we know God has the last word. We may even be facing the last battle – death itself – but through Jesus Christ we can say where O death is your victory, where O death is your sting. Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

The third step is the **Announcing of the Plan**. It is only at this third point in the process that we note that Mary has a specific and unique plan. Ours will be different, but the process remains the same. The plan is announced and revealed and we see the possibilities.

The inevitable fourth step of **Questioning doubt** is essential and inevitable. Any deep encounter with the mystery of God must leave us incredulous and asking, “How can this be?” Beware of any scheme or plan that is announced to you by messengers claiming to be from God and who won’t allow you to ask that question, or any other questions. The church is littered with the wrecks of deluded egos who claimed to be speaking for God, would not allow any doubt or questioning, and were later revealed to be nothing more than manipulators and controllers. It is vital to ask questions – to be critical. There is a difference between unbelieving and cynical doubt – which is corrosive and destructive of faith; and believing doubt – that is honest searching and questioning – I believe help my unbelief..

Having got through the fourth and challenging stage of Questioning doubt we then stand with Mary on the edge of mystery and miracle. All that remains is the “**Let it be”** This is the ultimate wording for an **Agreement to partnership** with God and Life

It was a great song it was by John Lennon, “When I find myself in times of trouble, Mother Mary comes to me, speaking words of wisdom, ‘Let it be. Let it be…’” John Lennon was not an obvious Christ follower, but he knew enough to know that Mary would know what to do in “times of trouble”
“Let it be”

Let it be to me according to your word…. Putting our lives at the disposal of the God for his work and purpose.

Our world says – keep your independence – do it your way.

Mary says let it be to me…

There is also within the gospel lessons a response, the Magnificat! Mary says, "God has recognized the lowliness of his servant." In other words, I am an ordinary person. I am not perfect.

There is an ancient story that comes from the part of the world that is so contested now, the Middle East. A man was talking with a friend about his love life. "I thought I had found the perfect woman," he said. She was beautiful and had the most pleasing features a man could imagine. She was exceptional in every way, except she had no knowledge.

So I traveled further, and met a woman who was both beautiful and intelligent. But, alas, we could not communicate. After further travels, I met a woman who had everything: a perfect mind, perfect intelligence, great beauty, all the features I was looking for, but...

"What happened?" asked the friend who was listening. "Why didn't you marry her at once?" "Ah well," he replied, "unfortunately, she was looking for the perfect man."

The good news of the gospel is that when God begins to look for us, God is not looking for perfection. God chooses the ordinary. God loves the unlovable. In fact, God reverses just about every expectation we might have of how God would enter into this world and save it.

We learn a great deal about the God of the Bible in these few verses of the Magnificat.

I want to share these brief attributes of God and ask you to do a simple spiritual exercise. Think of a dimension of God that is more comforting to you and also a facet of God that is most challenging to you.

* God saves
* God blesses
* God does great things for us
* God's name is Holy
* God is merciful
* God desires reverence
* God hates pride
* God judges human leaders
* God is on the side of the oppressed
* God feeds the hungry
* God helps those who serve him
* God remembers
* God keeps promises

The dimension of God that comforts you is your source of encouragement, and the aspect of God that challenges you is your "growing edge." When God calls and when we respond, we move into the future in the knowledge that God is with us, but also that God is always asking us to do more than that which is in our power to do.

All of this really is grounded in the nature of God.

* Does God flatter the proud? No, God scatters the proud.
* Does God seek an invitation from the throne? No, God brings those from thrones down and lifts up the lowly.
* Does God hang out at the finest restaurant? No, God throws a banquet for the poor.
* Does God choose a queen or a princess to be the mother of Jesus? No, God chooses Mary.
* Does God choose the wise and the noble and the powerful in this world to accomplish his will? No, God chooses you and me.
* Does God love those who are lovable? No. God loves the unlovable, God forgives the imperfect, God reaches out to the lost.

Christmas is really all about this attribute of God, who loves us, who reaches out, down to us, who "stoops to our weakness." Mild he lays his glory by, Charles Wesley has it in the carol. God comes in the unspectacular and the humble.

The clue is in the call of God to Mary and her response.

--God chooses the simple to confound the wise.

--God chooses the humble to shame the strong.

--God always chooses the ordinary to do something extraordinary.

What is impossible for us is possible for God.

In a stable, probably more like a cave, on a hillside in the country, out of the way, a baby was born to two scared young people. They had no gold to offer, only the circumstance of their lives. They heard the call of God, each in their own ways. And they responded in faith.

Christmas, for us, twenty-plus centuries later, is no different.

If we really hear the gospel, if we truly perceive the voice of the One who calls us, there is encouragement--you have found favor with God--but there is also a growing edge, and that is to reflect in our own lives the very nature of God:

* to save
* to bless
* to do great things for God
* to make God's name Holy
* to be merciful
* to be reverent
* to be strong
* to put away pride
* to place our leadership under the judgment of God
* to remember that God is on the side of the oppressed
* to feed the hungry
* to serve, and
* to do all of this in remembrance of him

So, what is God saying to you this Christmas? And what are you saying to God?

What is impossible for us is possible for God.

Come, Lord Jesus!