**Waiting for Emmanuel: Stay Open to God**

**Luke 1:26-38**

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 There is an old method of sermon-writing, taught before my time that was known as “three points and a poem”.  It’s kind of self-explanatory – when you structure your sermon, you make three points and end with a poem.  I, however, am going to break with the practice of my forefathers and do it backwards – because that’s just the way I am.

         I’m going to start with a poem, or part of one. The verses are taken from *The Annunciation*, by Denice Levertov.

We know the scene: the room, variously furnished,

almost always a lectern, a book; always

the tall lily.

Arrived on solemn grandeur of great wings,

the angelic ambassador, standing or hovering,

whom she acknowledges, a guest.

But we are told of meek obedience. No one mentions

courage.

The engendering Spirit

did not enter her without consent.

God waited.

She was free

to accept or to refuse, choice

integral to humanness.

This was the moment no one speaks of,

when she could still refuse.

A breath unbreathed,

Spirit,

suspended,

waiting.

         I love Levertov’s depiction of this moment.  The moment when Mary pauses, ponders, and ultimately agrees to open herself to God, to offer her life to God’s redemptive and transformative work in the world.

         This is the last in our Advent sermon series called “Waiting for Emmanuel”.  Today is Christmas Eve and, indeed, our wait is almost over.  Tonight, we will celebrate the birth of Jesus, the Messiah, but today we have a little bit more waiting to do.  Over the last few weeks, we have been exploring what it means to wait well during the weeks of Advent.  We learned from Jesus to keep awake, from John the Baptist to be prepared, from the Gospel of John, to seek the light.  And today we will learn from Mary what it means to open ourselves to God.

         As Protestants, we have a tendency not to think about Mary too much.  I mean, we understand the basics – she was very young, probably not more than thirteen or fourteen. She was not yet married but was engaged to a man named Joseph. She lived in a culture where a woman who got pregnant outside of marriage could legally be stoned to death.  And, of course, she found favor with God and, therefore, was chosen to bear God’s Son.

         But, as a rule, we don’t give her the attention and appreciation that our Catholic brothers and sisters do.  As a child, I thought of Mary as “gentle Mary, meek and mild” and the most I understood was that we should be obedient and not argue.  As a teen, I saw her as another character in a sort of far-fetched story that just left me with a lot of questions like…, Are we really supposed to believe in virgin birth?  How did this happen?  Like, biologically, how did this happen?  What had she done to become favored by God?

         Of course, as is so often the case, when we think so literally about a story in scripture, we miss the deeper lessons we might take from it.  Which is why I like Levertov’s poem so much – it leads us to three points – notice, three points -we almost never think about but which are, in my mind, critical to understanding Mary’s part in the Christmas story.  And how Mary’s story can parallel our own.

         Mary is certainly not the first in the biblical story to encounter God and find her life completely re-directed.  Abraham was called to leave his home and, ultimately, raise a child in his old age.  Moses found a bush on fire and ended up confronting Egypt’s Pharaoh and leading God’s people to freedom.  David was just tending his sheep when he was called in from the field and made king.

         And then there is Mary.  She is just living the average life of a young teen girl growing up in a little village in Galilee when an angel comes and announces she has been chosen by God to carry God’s son. What?  She must have been petrified at first, but the scripture passage goes on to tell us that she is soon perplexed and needs some time to ponder the angel’s words.  This is the moment that Levertov catches in her poem. The pause – a pregnant pause, if you will – when Mary has the chance to consider what God is asking of her and decide. So often, in focusing on Mary’s obedience, we idealize her, which, as author Debie Thomas puts it, “keeps her story at arms’ length from ours.  For better or worse”, Thomas goes on to say, “I can’t relate to a person who leaps headlong into obedience.  I can relate, however, to the one who struggles, to the one whose “yes” is cautious and ambivalent.”   I find it reassuring to consider that Mary needed a little time to wrap her mind around what God was asking her to do, and that God was more than willing to give her that time.  There is a moment when God waits, “honoring all that was at stake in her freedom to accept or refuse him.”

         Which brings us to point number two – Mary does have a choice.  The language the angel uses can be a little uncomfortable to our present day sensibilities.  He says, “You will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus.”  It doesn’t sound like she has much choice in this.  Yet, we understand that one of the fundamental characteristics of the relationship between God and humanity is that God grants us free will.  We have the option to make our own choices, even if those choices are not in concert with God’s movement or calling in our lives.

         What God is asking Mary to do will change the trajectory of her life forever.  Since we live in an age when stoning is no longer an acceptable form of punishment and unwed pregnancy is no longer punished with death, we cannot appreciate the risk she takes when, ultimately, she gives her consent.  She says “yes” – “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” God gives her time to consider and then she consents.

         In this day of the me-too movement, when women across the country, around the world, are sharing the stories of sexual assault and sexual harassment, this moment of Mary’s consent becomes all the more powerful.  God did not threaten or overpower her, God did not force or cajole her.  She makes her own choice – and does so with (point number three) incredible courage.

         Unlike Moses, Mary doesn’t try to get out of God’s call on her life by claiming she can’t speak in front of people.  Unlike Jonah, she doesn’t try to run away from God’s call.  Once she said yes, she was in this for the long run.  And the long run wasn’t easy.  From telling Joseph and her community to giving birth in a stable.  From raising a boy into a man to watching that man leave on a mission she hardly understood.  From standing at the foot of the cross as he died to celebrating his resurrection.  Mary’s journey through motherhood was filled with challenge, fear, and worry.  Yet, she had God’s promise – God would do great things through her and this son, this boy named Jesus, would transform the world.  Mary says yes and, as Levertov describes it at the end of her poem,

consent illumined her.

The room filled with its light,

the lily glowed in it,

and the iridescent wings.

Consent,

courage unparalleled,

opened her utterly.

         Each of us has moments in our lives when God calls on us, sometimes to do crazy or outrageous things in God’s name, and then waits to see if we will say yes.  Each of us will struggle with the decision, with self-doubt and fear.   And each of us will need to plant our feet solidly in our faith, trusting that when we open ourselves to God and allow God to change the trajectory of our lives, we will be transformed.  May the unfolding of this evening remind us what making a choice, consenting to God, and summoning up a whole lot of courage can do to change the world.

 Thanks be to God! Amen.