**Seeking the Sacred: People**

**Luke 1:26-38**

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 Of all the people in the Christmas story, after Jesus, perhaps the one Christians have struggled most to understand is Mary.  We don’t really know what to do with Mary. Catholics have venerated her; Protestants, aside from arguing over the validity of a virgin birth, have largely ignored her.  And yet, her story, the story of her calling, is one of the most poignant examples of the beautiful, sacred song so often sung by God and God’s people. It is a song in which God calls out the sacred within us and opens our eyes to see the sacred in each other.

 During these hectic and heavily commercialized weeks of Advent, we are talking about ways of staying connected to the sacred meaning of this season.  Not allowing ourselves to be so drawn into all the expectations and preparations of the weeks before Christmas that we lose sight of what we are preparing for.  Last week, we talked about sacred time. This week, we will explore the sacred as it is revealed in God’s people.

 The Annunciation, as this passage from Luke is called, is Gabriel’s announcement to Mary that God has chosen her to conceive and bear God’s son.  It is a call story that follows the same pattern as many similar stories in the Old Testament. God gets Mary’s attention by sending an angel to talk to her.  There is an assurance as the angel says, “Do not be afraid”.  A promise, “You have found favor with God”. A command, “You will conceive in your womb and bear a son”. And a prophecy, “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.”  Mary doubts and questions, “How can this be since I am a virgin?” and, after more assurance, she consents “Let it be with me according to your word.”

 Of course, what is just barely alluded to is how absolutely outrageous this plan of God’s is.  Mary is a nobody - a thirteen or fourteen year-old girl living in a little village in the middle of nowhere.  She has no royal blood, nothing distinctive to offer, no reason to be chosen as the mother of God’s son.  Plus, what God is proposing has the potential to have huge and dire consequences for her. As an unmarried and pregnant teen, she would have been ostracized much like pregnant teens often are today.  In fact, it would have been perfectly legal for Joseph to refuse to marry her and for her community to punish her by stoning her to death.

 Yet, God calls her.  God chooses her. And, despite, her fears and her doubts, the risks and potential consequences, she says “yes”.   Her “yes” is a testament to her obedience, her willingness to serve, but also to her tremendous courage and faith.  Faith that God sees something sacred in her - and will provide what she needs to love and care for this child who will love and care for the world.

 That’s how this sacred song goes - it is a song of call and response.  God calls on us at different times in our lives. We, just ordinary people, feel a nudge or a spark to do something that touches a life or creates a positive change in the world.  When we do, we sense the sacred, the spirit of God, at work within us. And, so we respond - often with more than a little bit of trepidation or doubt - and offer what we can. Sometimes, it is as small as offering a meal to someone who is sick; sometimes as big as traveling across the ocean to build an orphanage or a school.

What is interesting is that the song doesn’t end there.  God’s call touches the sacred within us and, more often than not, also opens our eyes to recognize the sacred in someone else.   We reach out to help a stranger, and we see the image of God in him. We teach a child or comfort a neighbor or visit a sick friend and, in them, we find something holy - the beauty of another human life transformed by love. It is the very reason we so often say that in serving someone else, our lives are changed as much, if not more, than theirs.

 This happens every day, and we have a lot of people in our congregation who have experienced this song - God calling them to do some kind of work in the church, on the job, at home or elsewhere and to come to see the sacred in the people they encountered. So, rather than filling this sermon with examples of people you don’t know living and working in places that aren’t here, I’ve asked three people to share their own experiences of encountering the sacred as they do their best to live their faith in the world (Chris Nelson, Julian Mortenson and Mark Baily speak).

If you are like so many of us seeking to find meaning in the midst of this crazy holiday season, if you are seeking the sacred as you go about your cleaning and decorating and holiday shopping, I invite you to stop now and again.  Stop and listen - listen for God’s song, God’s call. How will you respond? What can you offer? And then continue the song by seeking out the sacred in others. Christmas is the celebration of God incarnate, God in human flesh. First in Jesus and now in each of us.  Listen to God’s song as calling out the sacred in you. Then open your eyes to the sacred beauty of another - and invite them to join in the singing.

May it be so. Amen.