

Sermons at
First Lutheran Church (ELCA)
Reggie Denton, Pastor

December 24, 2023 (4th Sunday in Advent, Year B)
Luke 1:26-38

A professor sat at his desk one evening working on the next day's lectures. His housekeeper had laid that day's mail and papers on his desk, and he began to shuffle through them, throwing most in the trash. But then he noticed a magazine, which wasn't even ADDRESSED to HIM, but delivered to his office by mistake. It fell open to an article entitled "The Needs of the Congo Mission".

Casually he began to read it, and he was suddenly consumed by these words: "The need is great here. We have no one to work the northern province of Gabon in the central Congo. And it is my prayer as I write this article that God will lay His hand on one – one on whom, already, the Master's eyes have been cast – that he or she shall be called to this place to help us." Professor Albert Schweitzer closed the magazine and wrote in his diary: "My search is over." And he gave himself to the Congo.

That little article, hidden in a periodical intended for someone else, was placed by CHANCE in Schweitzer's mailbox. By CHANCE he NOTICED the title, that leaped out at him. Well...CHANCE? No. It was God. God CHOSE him. God CALLED him.

This morning we focus on the GREATEST call story there EVER was. The angel Gabriel appears to Mary and says, "Greetings, favored one! Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God." And he goes on to tell her that she will bear a son.

Now most of the time when we think of being favored by God, BLESSED by God, we think of GREAT things – we think it means we'll be successful or rich or powerful, something like that. But do you think it was GOOD news to an unwed, 12 or 13 year old girl that she was about to become pregnant? No. And she was engaged to be married, which was typical for girls her age. So as far as anyone BESIDES MARY knew, she had committed adultery. And that meant she could be stoned. This was FAR from GOOD news, this was DANGEROUS.

Maybe we need to RETHINK what it means to be BLESSED. Most often in Scripture, it has less to do with RECEIVING something, and MORE to do with being CHOSEN, chosen BY GOD TO DO God's will. And EVERY ONE of us, BECAUSE we are believers, because we're CHRISTIANS, has BEEN CHOSEN by God. EACH of us is part of God's plan to bring his Son to the world, to carry his Word to the 4 corners of the earth. EACH of us is called to touch somebody's life, maybe MANY people's lives, in SOME WAY, for GOD'S GOOD PURPOSE.

And that's not always easy. When President John F. Kennedy announced that the United States would attempt to put a man on the moon and return him safely back to earth, he added, "We accept this challenge not because it is easy, but because it is HARD."

GOD'S challenges are OFTEN HARD. When we ACCEPT those challenges, we give testimony to our faith in GOD to DO the IMPOSSIBLE. Getting PREGNANT WASN'T part of Mary's plan, and she certainly NEVER would have chosen it for HERSELF, but she ACCEPTED GOD'S will. And in so doing she TAUGHT us that God's BLESSING isn't it in how it ENDS; it's in how it BEGINS. And it ALWAYS begins with the words of Gabriel: "The Lord is with you."

That's what we MEAN when we say those words in worship. When we say "The Lord be with you. And also with you," It's not meant to be a greeting like "Good morning"; it's means "The Lord IS with you. You have been chosen and called." And that should be a little FRIGHTENING.

MARY'S response is a genuine one. It says that Mary "was much perplexed," and that she "pondered," and that she questioned, "How can this be?" Gabriel tells her not to be AFRAID, because she's TERRIFIED. WHO KNOWS what kind of inner spiritual struggle she HAD with this message?

As I read this story, I'm reminded of the HUNDREDS of people I've met over the years who ADMIT to struggle, doubt, and only GRADUAL insight about all things related to God, myself included.

We don't have ourselves and our lives all together as we THINK we SHOULD. We come MIXED up -- a mix of hopes and fears, moments of faith and just as MANY moments of FAILING. If we're honest with ourselves, we come with very LITTLE to BOAST about, and a LOT to confess. We come with no more RIGHT to expect God's ATTENTION, let ALONE God's FAVOR, than Mary, and the shepherds, and all those we hear about in THIS story of the ANNUNCIATION to Mary, and this afternoon and evening in the CHRISTMAS story.

We COME as people who don't EXPECT God's attention, and we LEAVE as the PEOPLE of GOD, reminded that WE are ALSO ones God has addressed, called, honored, and lifted up. We are God's OWN beloved children, and the WHOLE Christmas story – indeed the WHOLE story, Jesus' life, death, and resurrection – is intended to ASSURE us of God's love and presence, so that we can turn and SHARE that good news with others.

In the end, humility, faith and tremendous courage led Mary to say, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your Word." She LET God's Word SHAPE her into what GOD WANTED for her life.

And in that, Mary was a MODEL for us all. May we ALL LET God's Word this Christmas SHAPE us into something we NEVER would expect or plan for ourselves.

Hear God's Word to YOU: "Greetings favored one! The Lord is with you." Amen.