

Message Delivered at Christ Church
Sunday, December 18, 2011
TEXT: Luke 1:26-38
Delivered by Paul A. Johnson

She was a girl. Maybe fifteen; maybe sixteen; maybe a bit older; possibly a bit younger. Like the great prophets before her, she fulfilled her purpose in the bringing of God's Kingdom. Through her "yes," everything changed...including our own lives. After all, without her "yes," we're not here.

Still, she was a simple unmarried peasant maiden. Presumably, she was no different in outward appearance than the billions who preceded her and the billions that followed her. Presumably, she ran, and skipped, and played, and sang songs, and dreamed dreams the way young people have always done. Whether anyone in Nazareth would have singled her out as extraordinary, as worthy of God's exceptional favor, is unknown to us. Apparently, why the Lord's favor rests upon her matters nothing to Luke. Many are the questions the storyteller chooses to leave unanswered. That is one of them.

She receives what so many of us have asked for...a direct and clear communication concerning God's desire for her life. She receives a visit from an angel. And because the writers of scripture are honest about what it means truly to be confronted by the Divine, Luke lets us know that Mary doesn't quite know what to do with the whole thing. She is perplexed by his greeting. "Agitated" is a more appropriate word. The word is "diatarasso," and if you wanted to know how agitating it is to have an angel show up and pronounce God's favor over you...this the only place in the New Testament the word is used.

We like angels...God's messengers they are...we desire their appearance...but if there's a lesson here about angels it's a lesson of how they may be more likely to make our lives messier than they were before they showed up.

Certainly Gabriel tells her to not be afraid. But this is not a social call. This is not just a visit to pat her on the back and build up her self-esteem. To enjoy God's favor means that God asks something of us. And of Mary, God asks everything. The Lord smiles upon her, and the result is that her life is made more complicated rather than less; to share her body, give life to another and allow another to grow inside her, to give herself over completely in a way that only another woman would ever understand; to be a mother...so common in the aggregate, but so extraordinary in each particular case...

Beyond that, sometimes context matters. And the context here is such that take up the angel's offer, and she'll have some explaining to do. While she and Joseph are reserved for one another, they aren't married yet. To be the mother of God is what the angel offers. But to get there, she first has to be pregnant. And to be with child, but without a husband...that means from some there will be whispers, and snickers, and condemnation, and rejection. Nazareth is a small town. It would have its cluckers. Soon, everybody will know; but most likely, few will believe...maybe not even Joseph.

"We need to talk," she texts Joseph. "There was this angel, you see..." You finish the story, and see if you can find some way to have it all make believable sense. God makes himself known, and they both get more than they bargained for in being betrothed to one another. Mary

and Joseph's love for one another is not commented on in the scriptures; but they must have, truly and deeply, for God has asked much of these two everyday peasants.

An ordinary girl with an ordinary name in an ordinary small town on an ordinary day. She's perplexed, and then she's afraid.

But at some point she becomes courageous; and she stands; and without knowing the whole story...without knowing what it means in all its fullness...with very little to go on except some promises...she says "yes" to having the baby, and bearing the child.

And nothing is ordinary any more. The world changes, and we are changed, and what we await begins.

108 billion times; a common enough occurrence. But in the ordinary the extraordinary is revealed; and in the common, God's Kingdom takes one more step to fulfillment.

We live in a culture of the spectacular. It's flashed on the television and computer screens, and on every magazine cover confronting us in line at the drug store. We are enamored by the exceptional.

But if the lesson here about angels is that they mess up our lives, the lesson here about God is how he makes the common holy, and the ordinary extraordinary; and how it is that when God chooses to intersect directly with our lives, it is only occasionally through the thunderclap or mighty wind and more usually through a still, small voice.

Mostly, it is in the ordinary that we live our lives...going to work; getting our job done; getting the kids to school; wiping noses; changing diapers; doing the dishes; doing homework. From time to time we're brought to the mountaintop, but mostly it's in the level plain where we live our lives...which is exactly where Mary lived hers, and the angel showed up.

And it was right there—smack dab in the middle of another day—God made all the difference, and a grace beyond our understanding began. And it was right there, with a deeply provocative act of courage and a "let it be," Mother Mary made all the difference, too.

This is an exceptional time of year, with extraordinary things happening all the time. But the stories we hear...like this one...reveal that it is in the ordinary places that a broken world is restored, and the Lord comes, and existence made right; that God chooses to bring the Kingdom of God forward through ordinary things and ordinary people. Mary's a peasant girl, not Caesar's daughter; and Nazareth isn't Rome; and though it is through the Spirit she conceives, Jesus still arrives the same way the other 108 billion of us have arrived. A girl from a small town, a carpenter partner who stands fast, a bunch of shepherds...not too different from everybody else...to them the angels come, and through them God comes among us.

So maybe that should leave us to wondering this final week before Christmas...

What would it be like this week to see all those ordinary places as the places where God has chosen to be busy in your life? That they really aren't ordinary at all, but pregnant with godly possibilities? After all, 108 billion human births since the beginning of time is a lot of births...and each one of them has been special; really, not a single one of them has been ordinary. So what if we understood every "ordinary" thing we do this week actually to be a vehicle through which God's Kingdom is brought to birth?

And what would it be like this week to see that in all those ordinary places—where we are mothers, and fathers, and children, and spouses, and grandparents, and co-workers, and friends—in all those ordinary places, doing ordinary things...that in all those places doing all those things, we are exactly where God wants us to be, doing what God is calling us to do? That right where we are, we are God's bearers, the ones helping usher in the Kingdom exactly where we find ourselves?

What would it be like? Well...let me answer my own question. I think it would change the world, right where we are; and change it for the One whose arrival we await.

A blessed almost-Christmas to you, everybody. If you are traveling this week, know the Lord is in the car with you. If you are gathering with family and friends, know the Lord shows up, as well. If you work through the holidays, Jesus is at your job with you. If you still have shopping to do...well, take heart that you don't weather the mall alone, but that Jesus walks with you. The promise of this story, and what we await this Saturday evening, is that in all of those everyday places, God is at work, and the Lord's favor rests upon us to be share with others...all because a maiden said "yes" to something as extraordinarily ordinary—or ordinarily extraordinary--as becoming a mother.