

St. Timothy's Episcopal Church
The Rev. Frank F. Wilson
December 20, 2020

Advent 4: Year "B" [RCL]: 2 Sam 7:1-11, 6; Psalm 89:1-4, 19-26; Romans 16:25-27; Luke 1:26-38

Title: 'Tis the Season to Ponder

'Tis the season to be jolly.

I want to suggest this morning that as appealing is the notion that this is the season to be jolly, it is also, from the perspective of Christian tradition, the season to ponder.

The passage we hear this morning from the Gospel according to Luke is a reminder that this is the season to ponder the notion that our experience of Christmas is diminished if we rush to Midnight Mass without having heeded the invitation to think and to think deeply about who we are --who we are in Christ and who we are in relation to the Holy. This has been the theme throughout this season of Advent.

This passage wherein the blessed Mary is invited into a very special experience of the Holy we call the annunciation. It is that moment in the Biblical narrative when this young woman hears, in a very special way, a very special invitation to be who she is called by God to be.

The messenger of the Lord appears to Mary saying, "Greetings favored one. The Lord is with you."

And the text says that, in response, Mary 'pondered.'

Now, we might pause in our story at this point to ask, "Have we ever heard this kind of greeting?" And the answer is, of course, 'yes,' we offer such greetings to one another every time we gather.

Someone says, "The Lord be with you." And we respond, "And also with you." Such exchanges are then always followed by prayer - a prayer which we share together as a gathering of the worshipping community.

Have you ever stopped to wonder, or ponder if you will, why this little liturgical ritual? After all, the one leading the liturgy could simply say, "Let us pray," and then proceed with the praying of the prayers.

But in more normal times that is not what we do.

First we hear, “The Lord be with you” and we respond “And also with you.” The reason we do so is that what we are doing in those words is agreeing that it is our desire to pray. We are accepting the invitation to enter into a common, that is to say a community prayer. It is an affirmation that that which we do we do willingly because it is our desire to do it.

Technically we could refuse the invitation by simply not engaging in this liturgical exercise of greeting one another and agreeing with one another that it is our common desire to be in prayer.

But back to our story: And the Angel of the Lord, having then been given permission to proceed, goes on to tell Mary the amazing news that she has been chosen to be the mother of Jesus, the Son of the Most High, and he will reign and of his kingdom there will be no end.

And Mary, yes even the blessed Mary, questions God saying, "How can this be?"

And the Angel responds to Mary, saying, in essence, that it can be because God desires that it be.

And so again, Mary ponders these things in her heart.

Clearly Mary is a free agent in this transaction. She is a human being just as you and I are human beings. It certainly seems that she could have rejected the proposition.

After all, this will not be easy. She has her ‘husband-to-be’ to contend with. She will have the ever-so-ready-to-gossip little community of Nazareth to contend with. And this whole business makes her incredibly vulnerable and it very much complicates her life as the whole thing is shrouded in great mystery. In accepting this role, much is being asked of her.

We would not have been surprised had Mary with, “Why me Lord?” She could certainly have been forgiven had she responded saying, “Who am I Lord to be called upon to do such a thing? What special qualifications do I have? I am but a simple peasant girl - hardly old enough not to be thought of as a child.”

Mary could have said these things. She could have thought of many reasons to object; to say 'no.' And God, no doubt, then could, and no doubt would have, entered this world in a different way.

But her answer was not 'no.' Her answer was, "Here I am, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."

Dear ones, we hear this story at this time every year for a reason. We hear this story again and again, not that we might be entertained by a lovely story. And not even just that

we might hear again the story of our Lord's coming into the world as Emmanuel, God with us, as marvelous as the story is.

No, we hear this story again and again because it is our story. Not only our story as in the story of our shared, common faith, but because it is our *personal* story. It is not just Mary's story. It is our story. Yours and mine individually because God calls on, seeks out, each and every one of us.

Yes, the exact nature of who God calls us to be, and the 'what' as to what God would have us do, is different and takes place in different times and places and in different ways, but God is speaking to each of us.

And we have a choice.

We *can* say, "no." And we can fill in the blanks for ourselves. No, I'm too busy to be bothered. Or 'no' for surely I am not worthy. Or I'm not sure. Or I don't want to give up my independence - the sense that I, and no one else, not even God Almighty is in charge of my life which is but another version of "You're not the boss of me."

We can say "no," and then we would have to fill in the blanks for ourselves, because it would then be our story alone for God would not have been in it.

But we are reminded through Mary's story that what God desires to hear from us are the very same words God heard from Mary: Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."

We sometimes hear it said that God has a plan for our lives. And I believe that. I don't know if the plan is in place at the time of conception, or at the time of birth, or that maybe the plan evolves. But I do know that unless we cooperate with God – that is say unless we say to God, maybe in words - but surely with our heart and mind something like, "Here am I Lord; let it be with me according to your word" – unless that is our posture with God, the 'God-Plan' is most likely in jeopardy.

Well, this is the last Sunday in Advent.

Advent has been a time of invitation to ponder.

To ponder what it means that God is with us – both personally and corporately in the church.

And it has been an invitation to ponder those things in our lives that we ought not have done and those things which we have left undone. And so it has also been an invitation to ponder the amazing grace of God's forgiveness. And it has been an invitation to ponder how we might now attend to those things which we ought to have done but which been left undone.

And it has been an invitation to recognize and to give thanks for our many blessings, even at times when maybe we don't feel especially blessed.

Advent has been an invitation to slow down in our busyness and to ponder what it might mean to live holy lives in the presence of Holy God.

Sometimes we want to blame the commercialism of the Christmas season for our inability to experience the Holy. And I agree that the invitation that is sort of out there in the culture to become absorbed in the demands and commercialism of the season can be a problem. But, my friends, at the end of the day, if we miss the point of the season; if we forget that Jesus is the reason for the season, that is not Sam Walton's fault. It's not Wal Mart's fault. Nor is it the fault of the COVID virus that we have not made the time and the place to interact with the Holy. The issue in the form of a question is this: Have we made room in the inn? Have we made room in that resting place in our hearts and souls to make room for Jesus, the Christ, the Holy? Have we taken the opportunity to take holy stock of ourselves for as God awaited Mary's "Yes" God waits on us to make room for God's spirit in our lives.

God is never rude. God never insists. Rather God forever and always holds out the invitation.

And so as we leave this worship service, let us do so pondering these things in our hearts. Pondering what it might mean that God is with us, and that God calls on us to make room in the resting place of our hearts for God's holy presence.

And finally let us ponder the amazing reality that, like Mary, God calls us then to be God-bearers and to be God's vessels continually birthing Christ, if you will have it, in our lives and into the world.

Amen