



Advent IV, Cycle B, 2009
Gospel, Luke 1: 26-38
The Rev. Dr. Christian F. Brocato

+“Tell out, my soul, the greatness of the Lord! Unnumbered blessings give my spirit voice; tender to me the promise of God’s word; in God my Savior shall my heart rejoice.” Amen! (Hymnal #438)

For a number of years, I taught a theology course entitled, “The Theology of Worship.” In that course which was really a theology of liturgy, one of the exercises my students had to accomplish was recognizing in their own private lives the ritual patterns that shaped how they did things. So, one of the exercises was to chronicle what they did every morning from the time the alarm went off until they were out the door. What they came to realize, which was also one the goals of the exercise, was that for the most part, they did the same tasks routinely in the same sequence day after day after day. What they also came to realize was that when they overslept, then, their whole morning was thrown for a loop.

The real purpose in the exercise was to demonstrate the need that human beings have for rituals, for patterns, for sequential events that give us stability and even comfort. The liturgy of the Eucharist gives us comfort.

We come to church week after week expecting to see and participate in a set pattern of events we call a Service, a pattern that has been carefully crafted as a whole, a ritual pattern that speaks to the power of the symbols that it opens up for us. If those patterns are disrupted or ignored, then, some of us would feel a sense of unease and others, a sense of excitement.

Our Episcopal worship, our liturgy, is a ritual that takes its shape from the historical context of centuries of liturgical development. That ritual is one of the reasons we are here today. We have come to expect that our worship will look and feel essentially the same week after week and that gives us comfort.

Now imagine, if you will, a young teenager living at home some two thousand years ago. She has already been betrothed, that is, formally committed, to a man who is presumably somewhat older and a professional carpenter. He is actually of royal blood, and she is not. So, my guess is that this young woman’s parents feel pretty secure that their daughter will be well care for.

She spends the year after the announcement of her betrothal with her parents preparing herself for the years to come with her husband, the years of marriage to the man to whom she has already been formally committed, a style of commitment very much unlike anything we know today. This young Jewish woman, Mary, goes about her daily tasks just as she has done the whole of her life, pattern after pattern, ritual after ritual, prayer after prayer, until one day her life is turned upside down.

Our gospel for today demonstrates the power of disruption in our lives, the power of God’s grace that takes form in many and various ways, in different contexts, through different experiences and people. What form the Angel Gabriel took in this scene from Luke’s Gospel is unclear.

What we do know is that the Angel’s presence and message from God were indeed disruptive, totally unexpected, and life changing. Mary’s life would never be the same.

Mary's "yes" to God's invitation to conceive and bear the Son of God would forever alter her life and set her on an uncharted course that neither she, her parents nor her husband to be could ever have dreamed or imagined. And isn't that the power of God's grace in our lives, grace that sets us on an uncharted course that can be either very disturbing or very exciting?

We have come to the near end of our Advent journey. We stand near the threshold of the manger awaiting the birth of the One promised, the One who would free us from our sins, claim us as God's very own, and who would redeem us unto eternal life.

We stand in awe at what we have heard in our scripture passages week after week during these four weeks of Advent. These last two weeks have prepared us to recall the Nativity of Christ, the Redeemer of the world, the Savior of the Nations. But today's Gospel is not *really* about the Nativity as much as it is about Mary's embracing of her call to discipleship and what that can mean to us and our call and acceptance of discipleship as well.

In our own lives, we regularly say "yes" to our families, to relationships, to involvement on committees, to participation in worship, to support those in need, to attendance at town meetings, to voting, to paying taxes, etc. But, we also need to remember that every time we say, "yes" to one thing, we also say, "no" to something else. We can't go through life saying "yes" to everything and every one we encounter. We have to make decisions, and those decisions have consequences.

Mary was confronted by the Word of God and said, "yes" to that word of invitation. By doing so, she slammed shut a host of other possibilities that might have been hers in favor of an unknown, mysterious and awesome future. She surely had only a glimpse of what that future would entail in those few minutes that were hers confronted by God's powerful word of invitation. However, her response forever shaped her life and salvation history. Our response to God's Word and Eucharist can forever shape our lives and our histories as well.

We are gathered here because God has called us to be here, and we say, "yes" to that call. We say, "yes" to God's grace that we believe can and does inform and shape our lives as Christians. We have come because we have recognized our need to be shaped and formed in the image and likeness of God. We have come because we know that we are imperfect and in need of God's gifts of grace through the Word and Eucharist that nourish and sustain us for the journey of life.

I'm not just here week after week just because I'm a priest. I'm here because I not only want to be here, but I know I need to be at worship to be sustained by Word, Eucharist and the community of faith gathered together to celebrate God's special presence in this place. I believe that I can be a better person because of being here, and I hope and pray that that will be so.

My guess is that you, too, long to be a better person and that you, too, believe that being here will help to enable that to be so. When we are here and when we allow ourselves to be transformed as individuals and as a community, then, we can go with assurance and great confidence into our oftentimes broken and sad world. We become messengers of God carrying God's promise of life to the hearts and minds of those with whom we live and work, those near and far, those for whom our very presence can bring life and those for whom our prayers and support can bring comfort, comfort to a soldier in Iraq, a prisoner in China, a little child in Honduras, one who suffers with AIDS in Africa, and the list goes on.

As we await the celebration of the Incarnation of God's Son at Christmas, let us joyfully proclaim the greatness of God with "proud hearts and stubborn wills." (Hymnal #438) Let us join our voices with Mary's "Yes' to God in Christ," by committing ourselves to an "obedient response to the Word of God, which leads to a *life* of prayer and service." Like Mary, let us "not only magnify the Lord" with our lips but continue to commit ourselves to "serve God's justice" with our lives today and always.* Amen!

(Adaptation: *Mary, Grace and Hope in Christ*, Anglican – Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC), Joint Commission Statement, 2004.)