

Longing for New Life
Fourth Sunday of Advent
December 21, 2014
Jill R. Russell

Texts: 2 Samuel 7.1-11, 16;
Romans 16.25-27;
Luke 1.26-42, 46a
Luke 1.46b-55

I wonder what it was like when Martin Luther King, Jr. first realized the impact his ministry would make on the civil rights movement. I wonder what it felt like for Martin Luther when it dawned on him how far his questions and conviction would take the church of Jesus Christ. I wonder if Mother Theresa ever anticipated the breadth and depth of inspiration her life's ministry would hold for the world. I wonder if anyone who has ever been the center of a life altering impact on the world even knew just how big their contribution would be when they first started moving in the direction God was leading. Luke gives us a front row seat to just such a moment in the life of Mary, the mother of our Lord.

There is so much about these birth narratives that stimulate the imagination. They are rich with symbols and miracles and mystery. To dissect these stories for their historical accuracy or scientific plausibility is to misunderstand why they are here and what they seek to reveal. The significance of what we know about Mary is that she was a young peasant girl living in an unimportant place during a time when men of maturity and prominence and wealth were the center of power. If you were to take bets on where and through whom God would choose to come and dwell with us, the odds on Mary would have been incredibly high. No one could have seen this coming.

It seems an odd intrusion to hear 2 Samuel on the fourth Sunday of Advent when we've been hearing beautiful and prophetic poetry from Isaiah all season long. But I wonder if it isn't for this point: David is at the end of his life and is in legacy mode when he makes this magnanimous offer to build a permanent temple to house the tabernacle for God. Keep in mind that the

tabernacle is the place where they believed God's presence would dwell with them. If you were taking bets on where and through whom God's presence might choose to dwell, a temple in Jerusalem built by King David would be exactly what you might expect. And God says quite clearly and simply NO. At stake is the freedom of God to arrive and appear and be found and discovered in completely unexpected places. God will not be contained or controlled by the power brokers of the world. God seeks to come among us from the margins and the edges and the wild places and often looks for unassuming, perfectly ordinary and (from a certain perspective) unimportant people to be the messengers and vessels and instruments of God's coming among us. David wanted to build a physical house (a temple) for God when God intended to make a house of David's descendants. God's presence would dwell not in a place but among a people.

When I asked the question of whether Martin Luther or Mother Theresa knew from the beginning how significant their lives would be in the work of God in the world, my suspicion is that they had no idea whatsoever. Those who fancy themselves as the center of some big movement are not often the ones God chooses. They become far too invested in their own press and legacy to be of much use to a God like ours. No, Mary is absolutely perfect for this role and for this moment. And when the messenger of God puts before her the possibility of her role in God's plan she is stunned and perplexed and wonders how this could be.

I found myself this week pausing at the appearance of the angel Gabriel in this story. I know it is because of a conversation I was part of a couple of weeks ago. David Sinclair is a pastor in Scotland who was visiting Hope College in early December. He is writing a new book for Advent that is going to include a chapter on angels. He spent some time with a few of us here at Hope Church trying out some of the material. We scanned the scriptures for appearances of angels and spent some time uncovering what their role is as messengers of God and how the church might recover that role and our place within it. It's an important aspect of this story - the way that this messenger interrupts the presumed course of Mary's life and invites her into something far bigger, far more significant than she could have ever imagined.

In this story as in so many stories within scripture, the symbol of the angel enters as the messenger. It got me thinking about the messengers of God throughout the ages and in your life and mine. At some time or another people in our life invite us to consider how God might be looking to include us in some work God is doing whether that work is something that alters the course of history or simply alters the course of someone's day. I can't help but wonder when I see an innovator, or a brilliant theologian, or a social activist, or a selfless caregiver who planted the seed? Who offered the spark? Who gave the first lesson or offered the prompting question? Who was the messenger from God who stood before them offering blessing and challenge that prompted them like Gabriel prompted Mary to consider the role and place God had for them in bringing new life into the world? It makes me curious and on the lookout for who God may be asking us to prompt or encourage or push just a little.

Ultimately, what is revealed in these birth narratives is the remarkable and mysterious way in which God chooses to dwell among us. We are invited on this fourth Sunday of Advent to consider the incarnation which means the way in which divine life is embodied in human life. So there is the role of the messenger in the incarnation but there is also the role of Mary herself - the conduit through which divine life enters human life.

In the conversation between the angel and Mary, we see what one theologian I was reading called "double agency."¹ Clearly we can see the divine agency as the angel describes God's intentions to bring a savior to the world. Mary was stunned by this news, perplexed but I heard in her response "how can this be?" not the kind of incredulous doubt that we see in Zechariah when the birth of John the Baptist is announced but rather a kind of wonderment - a question of how she could possibly do this on her own? That's how I have come to take her assertion of being a virgin; it's not so much about the mechanics of conception but rather about her ability to do this on her own. And the angel's response is "You won't - you won't be on your own. God's Spirit will be at work in you."

¹ Cynthia Rigby, *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 1 Advent Through Transfiguration* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 94.

Kathleen Norris reflected on the annunciation, as this passage is often called, in an article for *Christian Century* some years ago. And I was taken by a poem she referred to by Denise Levertov, entitled “Annunciation”. In the poem, the poet is contrasting the ways we typically respond to God’s invitations in our life to the way that Mary responds. Here is how Kathleen Norris sets up the excerpt from the poem. “While annunciation of one sort or another comes to most of us, Levertov, insists there are all too often those strange and risky moments...

*when roads of light and storm
open from darkness in a man or a woman
are turned away from
in dread, in a wave of weakness, in despair
and with relief.
Ordinary lives continue.
God does not smite them.
But the gates close, the pathway vanishes.²*

When I think about what it was that made Mary willing to walk through that gate and step onto the pathway...when I think about why didn’t she turn away in dread or despair and re-enter her ordinary life with relief....one thought keeps coming into my mind: It was her deep longing for new life. You hear that longing in the Magnificat! When Mary recognized that God was bringing new life to the world – and she knew deep in her soul how desperately we need new life – that’s what pushed her to accept the demand and risk of this call

So as we come on Christmas Eve to celebrate the great and glorious news of new life that has come and is coming into the world, let us come with our eyes firmly fixed on the God who dwells among us so that when we go we are ready for those strange and risky moments when God may just ask us in some grand or small way to be a conduit or recipient of that new life that Christ brings.

² Kathleen Norris writing for the column *Living by the Word: Open Paths* in *Christian Century*, December 13, 2005. Denise Levertov's poem "Annunciation" is from *A Door in the Hive*, copyright © 1989 by Denise Levertov. Reprinted in *Christian Century* by permission of New Directions Publishing Corporation.