Sermon for Fourth Sunday of Advent

December 21, 2020

Luke 1:26-38/2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16

On the surface, David wasn’t the most likely person to be king. There was not much cause for him to believe he was special in any way.

He was the youngest son, in a culture that valued the eldest son over all the children. He was a shepherd, not the most important job. David was so unimportant that his father didn’t even bring him in from the fields where he was tending the flock when Samuel visited David’s father Jesse, and asked to see Jesse’s sons.

And yet God chose David to be the king over Israel.

He didn’t always make the best choices, but David’s faith and his trust in God guided him throughout his life, including in the story we hear today.

David had a plan. He was going to oversee the building of a temple. A proper house for God.

For years, the dwelling place of the Lord had been a tent that moved around with the people. But now they were settled. And surely God deserved a proper home, a permanent dwelling place among the people.

It was sound logic. The king had a palace. Shouldn’t God have something better than a tent? Wasn’t God worthy of a dwelling place that was grander than the king’s palace?

David shared his idea with Nathan the prophet, who agreed that it was a fine idea.

But God disagreed.

“Did I ever speak a word…saying, ‘Why have you not built me a house of cedar?’” No.

All along, God had been with the people wherever they went, providing for them along the way. And God promised to continue to be with them, planting them in a place where they would be disturbed no more and given rest from their enemies. A place where they could grow as the people of God.

Instead of agreeing that the people should build a temple, God flips things around, promising to make a house of David, a royal and holy line of descendants.

Rather than build a permanent dwelling place for God, the people are to be a house built *by* God.

Upon hearing this news, David demonstrates why God would choose a lowly shepherd boy to be king over God’s people, as he gives up his plans for a temple without hesitation, grumbling, or lament, and humbly expresses his gratitude for God’s promises.

On the surface, Mary would not have looked like the person an angel would visit, the person to whom an angel would say, “you have found favor with God.”

More than likely, Mary was a poor peasant girl who lived in a nowhere town.

Like other girls, she would have spent her childhood years learning how to do all the things around the house that a woman needed to do. She knew that one day she’d be married and it would be her job to run a good household, have children, and bring honor to her husband.

For a poor peasant girl, there wasn’t much other choice. Certainly no respectable choices.

Her parents would have arranged the marriage to Joseph the carpenter. During the betrothal period, she would have been preparing for her marriage and saying goodbye to the remnants of her childhood.

There was not much cause for Mary to imagine she was special in any possible way.

But then an angel was sent by God to visit her.

“Greetings, favored one. The Lord is with you.”

Luke tells us that Mary was ‘perplexed’ by the angel’s greeting. Which sort of feels like the understatement of the century.

And then the angel tells her God’s plan for her life. “You’re going to have a child and he will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High. He’ll be given the throne of your ancestor David. And of his kingdom there will be no end.”

It’s at this point that I always wonder how Mary has the ability to speak at all, much less question the angel. I think there’s good reason why, almost every single time the Bible mentions humans encountering angels, the first thing the angel says is, “Don’t be afraid.”

Still, Mary somehow had the presence of mind to ask a sensible question. She was an unmarried teenage girl. How could she have a baby?

When the angel finishes delivering his message, Mary’s response is one of obedience, humility, and faith. “I’m the servant of the Lord. Let it be with me according to your word.”

Mary is lifted up as an example of faithfulness with good cause. Yet it would be hard to describe her situation as one of being blessed, were it not for knowing the rest of her story and for the faith that we place in Luke’s account. She was a poor, young, unmarried girl who was about to become pregnant. Her obedience to God’s word to her could mean bringing shame on her family and risking Joseph’s rejection of her.

Mary’s entire life was upended.

Instead of protesting, instead of asking if God could possibly find a way to do this without her having to endure the stares and whispers of gossiping neighbors, Mary was humbly obedient. She trusted the angel, trusted that God was doing a wonderful new thing, and she who seemed so unimportant learned “that is is no small thing to be regarded, to be favored,” by God, “especially when you are exceedingly aware” that the rest of the world doesn’t think you’re all that special.[[1]](#footnote-1)

What we learn from David and from Mary is that God has a habit of choosing the people we might think are unimportant, and doing wondrous things through them. But those wondrous things happened because they embodied faithfulness in their lives, responding with faith and humility and obedience. In the face of their lives being upended, they were able to say, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord. Let it be with me according to your word.”

Though we may not be called to play such roles in our lives, the openness to the word of God and the humble obedience that we hear of in the stories of Mary and David are what we are called to practice.

Let it be with us according to your word, O God. Amen.

1. Karoline Lewis, commentary on Luke 1:26-38, *workingpreacher.org* 12/18/11 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)