

Title: Responding to God's Call**Text: Luke 1:26-38**

**A Sermon preached by The Rev. Randolph T. Riggs, D.Min.
Sunday, December 21, 2008
First Presbyterian Church of Lancaster, PA**

Our fifth and sixth grade class is busy getting ready for their Christmas Eve Pageant which is the centerpiece of our 5:00 p.m. service. This is something they have been looking forward to for at least five years, but last week one of them got a taste of how difficult it is to transcend the cultural celebration of Christmas with the true meaning of the Christmas story.

The children were trying on their costumes for the pageant, and the young man who was to play Joseph with the young girl who was to play Mary were in the hall waiting for the others to finish. Perhaps they felt just a hint of self-importance as they watched a much younger child tug at his father's sleeve, point in their direction, and ask, "Who are those people, Daddy?"

The father of the younger boy continued toward the nursery area without answering his son's question. Turning back, the preschooler asked the boy who was to play Joseph, "Who are you guys supposed to be?" The boy who was to play Jesus smiled a bit proudly and gave what seemed an obvious answer: "We are what Christmas is all about!" To which the preschooler replied, "Tell them you need a better costume. You don't look anything like Santa."

Our scripture for this morning is, indeed, what the message of Christmas is all about. We call it *The Annunciation*. It is the story of Mary receiving the news of the birth of Jesus from the Angel, Gabriel. Luke is the only one of the four gospels which tells the story in this way. Matthew focuses on the faith of Joseph. Mark and John

simply are not interested in the details of the birth of Jesus. They are more interested in the pivotal event through which he was given his identity as the Son of God; his baptism by his cousin John.

However, Luke has a story that he wants to tell which adds another dimension to the birth of Jesus; the story of a miraculous conception of the one we call the Son of God. This morning I want us to focus on Mary's response to what Gabriel told her because her response is not all that different than the response of people like her who struggle to be honest with the call of God in their lives. Her response is threefold: 1) Why me? 2) How can this be? 3) Let it be.

Why Me?

Luke records that the Gabriel came to Mary with that familiar greeting which begins the Rosary in the Roman Catholic tradition: "*Hail, Mary, full of grace. The Lord is with you.*" Then he records Mary's response: "*But she was perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be.*"

Maybe the first thing we need to say about the call of God in our lives is that most of us are like Mary. We have difficulty believing that God can use us. Even when the signs are clear in our lives that God wants us to move in a certain direction, we need time for it to sink in. We need to ponder it a while before we can really respond.

During this Advent season I had the privilege of meeting a new colleague, the Rev. Dawn Harmon. Dawn is the pastor of a small Pentecostal church here in town, and she has a heart for people who are incarcerated at the Lancaster County Prison. She visits there regularly, and I met her when I was visiting one of our members. During our conversation, Dawn told me about a recurring dream she had. In her dream she was

standing in front of a group of women she leads in a Bible Study, and all she could see was the feet of the women she visited in prison; bare feet in prison issue tennis shoes or rubber sandals with no socks. The prison does not provide socks. Families can give them, but those who do not have supportive families must put up with cold feet in the winter months. She said she thought the dream was a gift from God, but she could not figure out what it meant, so she was taking time to ponder it.

I gave her my card, and a few days later she gave me a call. She had continued to pray about her dream, and she shared with me that she believed God was calling her to provide a new, clean pair of socks for every prisoner in Lancaster County Prison--1200 pairs of socks with a note to each prisoner that God loved them and that the church loved them enough to keep their feet warm this winter. She asked me if I thought she was crazy.

I told her that I thought it was a wonderful idea, and that if she felt it was a call from God, I would do what I could to help her. That evening I shared her dream with the Board of the Lancaster County Council of Churches, and they thought it was a wonderful idea, too. What was even more amazing was the fact that we had been given money from a bingo game to be used for something special this Christmas, and the amount of the gift would cover the cost of 1200 pairs of socks.

So on Monday of this past week Dawn Harmon delivered 1200 pairs of socks to the Lancaster County Prison for distribution this week—a gift from God to people who we would usually forget at Christmas. All this happened because Dawn Harmon was willing to ponder a dream she had one night and ask God to help her make sense of it.

The same is true of Mary. She could have dismissed the visit of the angel as a bad dream. Instead, she was willing to ask, “Why me?” She pondered what she heard in her heart, and it was the first step in responding to the call of God.

How Can This Be?

The second step in Mary’s call was to seriously question Gabriel about what he was telling her. His message was that she would become pregnant by the power of God and the child would be the promised messiah. *How can this be?* It is a tale which is so incredible that it demanded that Mary ask the question. How can it be that she can have a baby without ever having sexual relations with a man?

If you have ever questioned the doctrine of the virgin birth, you are not alone. Mary was the first one to raise your question for you: *How can this be?* It has never been an essential doctrine of the Christian faith, and yet it is clearly important to the majority of people in our culture. In a recent poll taken by Barna Research Group, 75% of those who responded said they believed that it was true.

William Barclay reminds us that in Jewish tradition it is held that in the birth of every child there are three partners—the father, the mother and the Spirit of God. Jews believed that no child could ever be born without the Spirit of God being active. And it may well be that the New Testament stories of the birth of Jesus are lovely, poetical ways of saying that even if Jesus had a human father, the Holy Spirit was operative in his birth in a unique way.

The Hebrew word in the Prophet Isaiah (Isaiah 7:14) which is translated as virgin literally means “a young woman;” a young woman shall conceive and bear a son. Matthew and Luke are the only two places where the virgin birth is mentioned. The rest

of the New Testament is silent on this issue. So what are we to do with this doctrine which has been the cause for many thinking people to reject the story of the birth of Jesus?

Martin Luther, in one of his Christmas sermons, said there were three miracles that occurred in Christ's birth: God became human, a virgin conceived and Mary believed. For Luther, the greatest miracle was the third miracle, Mary believed. (source: Faith J. Conklin, "The third miracle." Advent Sermon, Kresge Chapel, Claremont School of Theology Web Site, December 10, 2003.)

One of my mentors in ministry, Bruce Larson, died on Monday of this week. Listen to what he says in his commentary on our passage this morning: *"For two thousand years the church has not made belief in the Virgin Birth a requirement for membership, but has accommodated those who believe that Jesus had a natural father. On the other hand, essential to Christianity is the belief in the Incarnation. You must, if you are a believer who is in the mainstream of orthodox Christianity, believe that God was in Jesus as in no other human being..."*

Let me say again that you can be a devout Christian and still reject the idea of the Virgin Birth. The mainstream of the church honors that position. But if you believe it is impossible, then I would question your view of God. You are limiting God. In the words of J.B. Phillips great book...Your God is Too Small. We Christians believe in a God who is big enough to deal with our most pressing personal problems. God is big enough to deal with our most pressing national problems and the problems of our world. Our Creator and Redeemer is the God of the impossible."

Mary asked the question, “*How can this be?*” However, she did not define God by her question, and neither should we. She did not say what God proposed was impossible. She believed that with God, all things are possible. So we leave the reproductive physiology in the hands of God, and we focus on the more serious question of God’s willingness to take up residence with us in the life and ministry of Jesus Christ.

Let it Be

The final faith statement in responding to the call of God in Mary’s life was her willingness to be used by God; to allow God to do what God desired. She did not pray as many of us pray, “*Thy will be changed.*” She prayed what Barclay calls *the world’s greatest prayer*: “*Thy will be done.*” (DSB, p. 13).

Yesterday afternoon I attended the memorial service for Clifford Huffman. Cliff is the father of Alisa Bair, our Associate in Worship Ministries, and so I went to support Alisa. However, I came away blessed by the testimonials of a man who taught his family and his coworkers what it meant to be a faithful Christian.

For those who have lived in Lancaster County for most of your life, you may remember Cliff as the voice of “Religion in the News” on WLAN for 35 years until he retired in 1992. He also served as Moderator of Lancaster Church of the Brethren, President of the Lancaster County Council of Churches, and Chairman of the Trustees of Elizabethtown College.

In testimony after testimony those in attendance heard about Cliff’s faithfulness from what he taught his children about tithing to the risks he was willing to take as a leader of his church, the Council of Churches and the College to help them become stronger in their witness to the grace of God. On my worship bulletin I wrote a note to

myself: What made Cliff Huffman a great man was his willingness to be used by God. In decisions related to his family, his career, and his contributions to the community, this was the testimony which was consistent. He was a man willing to be used by God, and because of his willingness, God was able to accomplish great things through him.

This is also the witness of Mary in responding to the call of God in her life. It wasn't that she fully believed she was the best person to do what God asked of her; nor did she fully understand all that was about to take place, but she was willing to be used by God to accomplish the purpose of what God had in mind for the world.

And the same is true for us. When we are willing to place ourselves at God's disposal, God can do great things through us.

Conclusion

Three responses of Mary to the Angel Gabriel give us what we need to know to respond to the call of God in our lives. Don't dismiss God because you don't understand what God might be asking of you. Take time to ponder the questions in your heart. Don't be afraid to ask your questions of God's call. They will lead you to believe in God's authority and God's power. And finally, don't be afraid to be used by God. We are the primary vehicles through which God accomplishes His purposes on this earth.