

Isaiah 11:1-10 ~ Luke 1:26-38
 From Generation to Generation...God meets us in our Fearⁱ
 Second Sunday of Advent ~ December 4, 2022
 The Rev. Dr. Laurie Brubaker Davis
 Communion Meditation

Introduction to Second Scripture Lesson

We already know the story I am about to read. But do we? In some ways, yes. It's called the "Annunciation" –the story of the angel Gabriel coming to Mary and announcing that she has been chosen by God to be the mother of Jesus. And Mary goes along with it. That's pretty much it, right? Well yes, and no. The more you look, the more you see. The more you listen, the more you hear. And since this is a new day in your life, and this world is not the same as it was yesterday, I'm convinced that God has something new for you today, in this old, old story.

With ears and hearts wide open, I invite you as I read, to notice what *you* notice. What word or phrase jumps out and addresses you? Then ask yourself, where's the invitation in it for you, this day? Here it is, starting at Luke 1:26.

Communion Meditation

Today, let's start (for just 60 seconds) with your meditations, rather than mine. In the story I just read, what did you notice that you noticed? What word or phrase of this story jumped out, or shimmered for you? Turn to a person near you and tell them. And in 30 seconds, I will signal for you to let the other person talk, and you can listen. 1-2-3 go!

Here's mine: the word "favor" in this story not once, but twice. The root of the word is *Xaris*, or grace. This is the undeserved Grace that God bestows up on. Mary was not the first person with whom God "found favor." It's part of our tradition beginning with Abraham. Remember Tevye, the father of five daughters in the 1971 musical *Fiddler on the Roof*? He loved to quote the Good Book, (as he remembered it). He reminds his friend Mendel, "As Abraham said, "I am a stranger in a strange land...." Mendel corrects him, "Moses said that." Tevye comes back with, "Ah, well, as King David said, "I am slow of speech, and slow of tongue." Mendel corrects him again, "That was also Moses." To which Tevye, "For a man who was slow of tongue, he talked a lot."

God called Moses, on an otherwise ordinary day, from a burning bush for a seemingly impossible mission. For Mary, God spoke through the Angel Gabriel. Being a young Jewish woman, (the one thing we know for sure about Mary), she would have known these call stories deep in her tradition. So when Gabriel appeared to her out of the blue and told her she was God's "favored one," not once, but twice, she had every reason to be afraid. In our NRSV translation it says she was, "much perplexed." That word in the Greek, *dietarachthe*, can also mean "disturbed, agitated, or troubled." What I noticed in this story for the first time this week, was her immediate response to being "favored" by God. Usually we *like* being favored, or the favorite: the favorite pupil in the class, the athlete favored by the Coach. Or to be rooting for the favored team to win a football game, like against the Chicago Bears... today... just for instance.

Not so for Mary. Her visceral response to being addressed as God's "favored one," was absolute fear. She was "disturbed, agitated, troubled, and perplexed" *before* there was any mention of her "mission impossible": to conceive and bear, and oh by the way, raise a baby boy who would be none other than the Son of God, the Messiah. I am reminded of Tevye's quip about being chosen, in one of his many "heart to heart" conversations with God, when he said, "I know. I know. We are your chosen people. But once in a while, can't you choose someone else?"

Did you notice that before Mary said "yes" in so many words she said "wait a minute" to the angel Gabriel? She needed just a tad bit more data to work with. So, she asked her first, most obvious question, "How can this be since I am a virgin?" And she got her answer. One that opened a Pandora's box of questions for the rest of us for the next 2000 years. But apparently for Mary, it was adequate. And so, she said, "Yes...Here I am." She said "yes" to the address of God: Stepping into the river of her tradition of Abraham, Moses, and the prophets. Knowing her life would change forever but having no idea what she was really getting into.

I think we know what that feels like. saying "yes" to something that seems right and important and having only faintest idea of what you are getting into. God seems to work on an annoyingly tight version of "need to know" basis. I think we know about that. Like those who signed up to volunteer to Co-sponsor a refugee family resettling here in Marshfield. No one, when they signed up or got the training had any idea what country the family would be coming from, or the size of the family. Volunteers on this team simply said, "Here I am." And in due time, the family arrived. And this new, fulfilling, enriching, still unfolding relationship has begun.

Or those of you who said "yes" to becoming a Deacon or a Ruling Elder. Almost every year someone voices how they wish the Nominating Committee would spell out more specifically what an elder or deacon will be asked to do. Although we can always learn to do a better job with our calling process, at the same time being a deacon or an elder can never be fully explained or outlined. Another example: the experience of being married or parenting children, don't we say "yes" with only half a notion of what we are getting into?

"A fiddler on the roof. Sounds crazy, no?" explains Tevye. "But here in our little village of Anatevka, you might say everyone of us is a fiddler on the roof trying to scratch out a pleasant, simple tune without breaking his neck. It isn't easy." Not for Jews living in Russia in 1905 under the empire of Nicolas the Second. It wasn't easy for Isaiah, who likely felt like a fiddler on a roof, when he scratched out that pleasantly amazing, poetic vision of the peaceable kingdom right while King Hezekiah was barely hanging on. The Northern Kingdom already fallen to Samaria, and the shadow of the first deportation to Babylon, loomed on the horizon. It wasn't easy for the early Christians when Luke's Gospel was written. They were living under Roman occupation, digging out from the rubble of the fall of the Temple in 70 CE. Nor is it easy for us, right now, in our current political climate, to say "yes" to God's address.

Tevye goes on, he says, "You may ask "Why do we stay up there if it's so dangerous?" Well, we stay because Anatevka is our home. And how do we keep our balance? That I can tell you in one word: tradition! Now before we all break out into the marvelous song, "Tradition!" Take a leap with me into 2022 and the genius of Sterling Harjo's FX Series, "Reservation Dogs." The Indigenous teens in that show, rather than using the word "tradition," say: "Tradish!" Well friends, this table, this holy meal we call Communion, is our "tradish." With this bread and this cup, Jesus comes to us to feed us and give us courage in the midst of our fears. At this table is our power food. We are given the power in the midst of our fears to say "yes" to God's address.

"Yes" to opening our eyes and acknowledging the pain and brokenness all around us: The wolves of poverty still devouring the lambs, the lions not sitting with the calves, the snakes of addiction and untreated mental illness that are biting people we know and love. When we say "yes" to God's address, we say "yes" to the invitation to sit with those who are experiencing dissonance and dysphoria--not sure yet, of their place or gender identity, their status or station in life. When we say "yes" to God's address, we say "yes" to strapping on the belts of righteousness and faithfulness *in order to say "no"* to all forms of hate: hate speech, hate videos, hate memes. When we say "yes" to God's address, we say "no" to antisemitism. Period.

Mary was jolted by God's address, and so are we. I will close with a prayer written by theologian, author, mentor of mine, Walter Brueggemann which he titled, "Jolted by Address." Let us pray:

*We are surrounded by a din of demanding voices:
selling, recruiting, seducing, coercing.
We screen them out in order to maintain our sanity,
to secure our rest.
And then, in the night, you address us,
you call us by name, you entrust to us risky words, you empower us with authority.
But your voice is on first hearing not distinctive.
We confuse your voice with that of an old friend
or a deep hope or a powerful fear or an ancient bias.
We hear, but we do not listen—
jolted, bewildered, resistant.
But your voice sneaks up on us:
you address us, you call us by name,
you entrust us with risky words, you empower us with authority.
Sometimes...occasionally...boldly...we answer:
"Speak, I am listening." Then we say, "Here am I."
And listening we are made new and sent dangerously
by your address.ⁱⁱ*

ⁱ "From Generation to Generation" Advent theme was created by A Sanctified Art LLC, sanctifiedart.org.

ⁱⁱ Walter Brueggemann, *Prayers for a Privileged People*, (Abingdon Press: Nashville, TN, 2008), pp.113-114.