

Full of Grace

Daniel 10: 10-19

Luke 1: 26-38

December 1, 2013 -- Advent 1

Rev. Dr. Charles A. Parker

I. Introduction

The week before last, I was driving in the car someplace with Julia and she popped in the front seat and as she's wont to do, she turns on one of her favorite radio stations, and this particular day she turned on 97.1 FM. I was greeted with *Jingle Bell Rock*, and had this horrible revelation that for the next six weeks, we were going to be listening to inane Christmas songs. And I responded in the way that you would want your pastor to respond, right? I told her it was an abomination before the Lord and to turn it off immediately. I'm trying to get her used to the term "abomination before the Lord" because I'm anticipating I'm going to have to use it a lot in the next 10 years or so, so she should have that as part of her vocabulary.

But, you know, we wrestle in the church about the appropriate places in the liturgical calendar to start playing Christmas songs, and I'm not sure exactly what the right answer is. I just know it's not before Thanksgiving, right? It just can't happen. It's wrong. But, of course, after I had heard the song on our radio, then I've started to notice every time I walk into a public place with a PA system, we've got all of that music playing as we will for the next however many weeks because we have been programmed to have a Pavlovian response to that music that essentially encourages us to buy as much stuff as we possibly can because now it must be the Christmas season. So, this is a way marketers have us trained to prepare for Christmas. We hear this music and then we move right into that place where we start spending.

Advent, of course, plays that role in the life of our church but for a different purpose. It is geared towards helping us get in the mindset where we can reflect on and start to appreciate anew the miracle of the incarnation. We prepare ourselves for this joyous season of Christmas. This Advent as we travel towards Christmas together, we're going to be having as a guide through this season the mother of Jesus and we will be following the narrative of Mary throughout these several weeks of Advent.

II. Background

Mary is a powerful guide for us because she captures so beautifully what it is to receive a call from God and to engage in following it with faithfulness. For Luke -- we will be following Luke's narrative throughout this Advent -- she is the one who both proclaims and embodies the divine word. Luke has Mary as the one person who follows the entire narrative of the life of Christ from beginning to end. She is there from his conception through his birth, his childhood. She is part of his ministry throughout the story. She's at the foot of the cross as he's being killed. And she is with the disciples in Jerusalem when Pentecost happens. She is part of that whole narrative arc.

Now, we don't know much about Mary. Luke tells us that she was raised in Nazareth, which was a small agricultural village outside the Roman capital of Galilee of Sepphoris. There is no historical reference to Nazareth at that period, it was such a small place. We know from archeology that it appears to have been an agricultural community of somewhere between 400 and 500. It's a very small, little village in which Mary was raised.

Mary probably would've been in her late teens, maybe up to her early 20s at the point that she receives this visitation from Gabriel. Young women were betrothed quite early, often at 12, 13 years old, and they got married somewhat later. And if you were from a low-income background, chances were you actually got married probably a little bit later if they wanted to keep you working in the family longer. So, since Mary's from a low-income background, as we know, she's probably some place in her late teens to early 20s when this arises. According to tradition -- and you'll remember from the Gospel of John -- Jesus asks the Apostle John to care for Mary after his death, and so, tradition has Mary living with the Apostle John in Ephesus for her last years.

III. The Power of the Word

Because of her deep connection throughout the story of Jesus, Mary has received great reverence throughout Christian history. Our Roman Catholic brothers and sister refer to her regularly as the mother of God, and our Eastern Orthodox brothers and sisters call her the Theotokos, the one who bears God.

As we meet Mary in this initial story of The Annunciation, she is a young woman in Nazareth preparing for her wedding, and she encounters this angel, the same angel incidentally that is part of the Daniel narrative that we also just heard and will touch on a little bit later. And in this very brief encounter of a couple of verses, we learn a great deal about Mary and who Mary is and what Mary has to teach us as we engage in this Advent journey.

The first thing that is worth highlighting in the story is that it is all rooted in the incredible power of the Word of God. Our scriptural witness is that God's Word in and

of itself effects dramatic change in the way the world unfolds. We have God speaking a word over the waters of chaos at the beginning of Genesis and calling the world into being just with a word, the Word speaking through the prophets throughout the history of Israel, and then, finally becoming incarnate, becoming flesh in Mary.

That's an important place to start because in our life, we often get very dismissive of language and dismissive of words. I think that's particularly true in a place like Washington where so much of our life is built around words and often words that mean nothing, right? Because politicians have developed to a fine art separating words from their actual meanings, so we often get very dismissive of people and the words that they speak. And we often contrast in our language words versus action, words being of doubtful value and action being where it all counts. We use the phrase, "Oh, those are just words." They're just castoffs. But, see, in the scriptural witness, words themselves carry tremendous power. And the message there is that God's word, the word of truth, the word of justice, has in it of itself the power to transform. It's when our words get separated from the divine word, it's when our words don't echo the truth that we all know as before, that they start to lose their power.

But God's word has great power to change and transform. And we see this in this initial meeting with Mary when Gabriel comes. Gabriel is an angel, and "angel" is a word that in itself just means messenger, it's someone who brings the word. An angel in the ancient world was not a heavenly being. The Greek word "angelos" simply means messenger. An angel was someone that a king or a queen sent out to a city to proclaim a message, to share a word. So, Gabriel fulfills that function for God. Gabriel sends the word to Mary. Gabriel doesn't do anything in the story except speak.

There're no dramatic signs of power. There're no miraculous events that Gabriel brings about. Gabriel speaks a word and Mary's life is transformed. And Mary, in receiving that word, in giving that word, literally birthed from her body changes the entire landscape of human history. Words have great power. And our invitation in the story is to use words with great power, which means to speak truth to power, to speak a truth that because it reflects reality, evokes a change.

What I'm talking about is something Bill Holmes reflected on last Sunday when he was talking to us about the sermon that he preached in Dallas after President Kennedy was assassinated, and the incredible and potentially violent response that that word evoked. Because the word that he preached was a word of truth, right? And because it was true, because it reflected who God is, what God's call is for us, that word took on a life of its own as that sermon got picked up by the national news and spread across the country and made a change in the way people understood the assassination of President Kennedy. Bill didn't do anything dramatic. He spoke a word and that word had power to it because it was a word from God.

We spent a little time last Sunday after our service talking about our congregation's response to our denomination's increasing tendency to try clergy who officiated at same-gender weddings and how we could speak a word of truth to that situation. And we're still sorting that out but I mention it today because you're going to start seeing those words, you'll see them on a banner out front of our church, all three of our churches, and actually a number of other churches around the city. You'll see it in the newspaper ad that we produce. You'll see it in the website.

We're speaking a word. A word of truth that I trust will be part of the transformation of our denomination on this particular issue. Our ability to speak truth has power to it. And I think we sometimes don't claim that. I often find myself -- and it may be just my innate conflict avoidance, but I often find myself in conversations with people where I have a very strong sense that I am being called to speak a word and I end up being silent because it's just easier than engaging in a conflict with someone. And I suspect none of the rest of you wrestle with this, but I found myself in a number of conversations this week where my instinct was to shut up and just listen -- because pastors are good at listening, right -- and instead felt a call to say something that may have been a little uncomfortable in that situation but was, as far as I could discern, truth, and that has the power to engage and transform in ways that we should not minimize. Where are the places in your life you have an opportunity to speak the word of truth in a way that can bring healing, in a way that can bring challenge, in a way that can bring about justice?

The second thing that is helpful to note in this story of The Annunciation is that it was completely unexpected. Mary is a young teenage woman in a little, tiny agricultural village preparing to be married. She had a particular vision of how her life was going to unfold. And in comes the Word proclaimed by the angel and her life takes a turn that she could not possibly have imagined. We spend a lot of our time trying to avoid unforeseen circumstances, right? We spend a lot of time insulating ourselves and mapping out the way we want our life to unfold. And the Word of God has this pesky tendency to come to us in incredibly unexpected ways, at incredibly unexpected moments to change the way our plans had been laid out. There's that old

expression, “If you want to make God laugh, tell Him your plan,” because God’s got a different one. And what is so powerful about this story of Mary is her ability to accept this word and watch her life become transformed. The power of that word changed everything about who she was, what her life was about, and in fact, the history of the entire world because she was receptive to that unexpected Word.

Again, I’m tying this in with our conversation last week, Bill Holmes had not planned to preach a sermon on hatred the Sunday after President Kennedy was assassinated, but then the assassination happens and he’s faced with a circumstance he had no way of preparing for. And answering that call by preaching a sermon that he had no intention of preaching, and then, again, watching the power of those words come to life.

Frankly, a couple of weeks ago, I had no anticipation that we were going to be engaging in a renewed way on the issue of marriage equality. I was perfectly happy being part of a reconciling congregation, having committed myself to officiate at any marriage a member of our church invites me to officiate at and just sort of keeping a low profile and doing what we thought God wanted us to do. The fact that our church has now entered a different phase of this dialogue, our denomination has entered a new phase of this dialogue in terms of trying clergy was an unexpected turn for me. I don’t know where that’s going to lead. And frankly, even if I had it figured out, I’d be wrong, because it’s going to take a different direction than I had anticipated. But our willingness to engage, to be responsive to the Word even when it comes from unexpected places and invites us to take unexpected turns in our journey is part of what makes Mary such a powerful model for us.

The last point about Mary's acceptance of the Word spoken to her is that that's a terrifying word. I mean, think of any of the young women in our congregation who would find themselves unexpectedly pregnant and what an incredibly dramatic and scary change that makes, that upending of everything that they had planned, that their families had planned for their lives. And then, multiply that -- because of course, in Mary's day, having a young, unmarried woman found pregnant was punishable by death, by stoning. So, you've got that whole layer of her physical safety that is now part of that, it's a scary, terrifying place to be. God's call to us frequently invites us to go places that we didn't expect and frankly are pretty uncomfortable for us. They may even be frightening.

IV. Conclusion

It's notable in the story of Daniel when the Word comes to Daniel, his reaction is to be so terrified he can hardly move. And Gabriel lays a hand on him and says, essentially echoing the words that Gabriel speaks to Mary, "You may not understand how this is all going to work out, but with God, all things are possible." And so, in the face of this terrifying, life-altering announcement, Mary's response is a simple, "Let it be to me according to Your will." A simple acceptance of that Word, trusting in the power it contains to take her someplace she has no idea where it will lead and to follow. And in that receptivity, Mary allows herself to be a channel of God's grace and power that changes all of human history.

Much of our reflection on the life of Mary over the centuries has highly romanticized her and it's easy to set her apart as a sort of special class of human

being. I wonder if our Advent celebrations might be a little bit different if we recognized that the glory of Christmas comes about simply because a fragile, vulnerable, ordinary young woman hears the word and opens herself up to receive it in a way that all of us are invited to do. God is seeking to transform the world through every single life here. If we can hear that call and open ourselves up to become channels of that power, a transforming power of God into the world, that's what Advent is about.

Amen.