

The Fourth Sunday of Advent

December 20, 2020

"HOW CAN THIS BE?"

2 Samuel 11:1-11, 16 ~ Luke 1:26-38

One Palm Sunday I went to church with a friend. During the service the minister invited the children to come back later that afternoon for an Easter egg hunt. After the Easter egg hunt, he told them that "snakes" would be served. *Snakes?!* He meant to say "snacks," of course, but suddenly everyone was visualizing him handing the children pit vipers. Well, we all occasionally trip over a word or phrase. I know I do. It usually happens when I'm trying my best to be the most serious. It seems to be an occupational hazard for preachers. One of my favorite slip ups occurred when our good friend and pastor in Texas announced that we should all try to participate in "Breast Awareness Month." Clearly, what he meant to say was "Breast Cancer Awareness Month." Everyone had a good laugh, and it totally disturbed the service.

Well, we all enjoy an occasional disturbance to the routine. These interruptions disturb our norm and make us change our agenda for a while ... they make life more interesting. All of us like to be disturbed ... up to a point. But when these disruptions affect our relationships ... challenge our opinions ... or change our plans ... they aren't so welcome after all.

The Bible is full of God's disturbing calls. Change your ways! Change your mind! Change your plans! Can you think of a single instance in the scripture when God's call comes at a convenient time or fits easily into somebody's routine? And when does God work exactly the way we all expect? God sends Abraham and Sarah into a strange land on a thin promise. God meets ill-tempered, tongue-tied Moses out in the wilderness ... makes him go back to the last place he wants to go to face the last person he wants to face ... with the last message he wants to stutter before the mighty Pharaoh, "God says let my people go!" God calls Ruth to leave her homeland and join a new people where she will be poor and a stranger. God calls a little shepherd boy, the youngest of his brothers ... who plays a lyre and writes songs ... to anoint as the greatest King, save one, that Israel would ever have and makes an everlasting covenant with him. God calls Jeremiah, who says, "Hey, I'm just a kid," but God says, "Hey, I can use kids, too." Nathaniel learns something good can come out of Nazareth. Jesus shows the Pharisees

that God loves prostitutes and tax collectors just as much as priests and Bible teachers ... and calls a rugged crew of fishermen and marginalized women to be his closest followers.

Humanity puts Jesus on a cross and in a tomb, but God raises him from the dead. Then the Spirit shows the apostles in Jerusalem that the gospel includes the Gentiles just as much as the Jews ... and Samaritans, and women, and eunuchs, and even Roman prison guards! God keeps making these disturbing, surprising calls which break the rules, change our minds, and push us in new, unexpected directions. God never lets us rest in our routines, our assumptions, or our self-righteousness.

Perhaps the most surprising, most disturbing call in the Bible comes to Mary. Scholars tell us that Mary would have been twelve to fourteen years old when the angel appeared to her. Think of that! A mere child of a woman from a poor priestly family ... her life is mapped out for her. She is betrothed to Joseph, a poor carpenter who is older and well known around Nazareth. With an arranged marriage according to their customs, soon she will leave her parents and move in with him. Suddenly an angel is calling her name! Gabriel appears in all his glory and brings an invitation from God that disturbs everything that she has planned ... everything that she has expected ... all of her Jewish girl dreams. She must rethink all her values, loyalties, commitments, and ideals. She has to tell her parents, her rabbi, Joseph! Who will believe her as she defends her call? And why her, of all people? She has no training for this. There are no precedents. She stands amazed with fear and wonder that the eternal God has chosen her to mother the Messiah!

"How can this be?" Mary asks ... just as we ask when God calls us to something we didn't expect or don't want to do, or worst of all, don't believe. "How can this be?" Mary asks, and we must wonder the same thing when God calls us to be the means by which the love of Christ is born into this world and the good news shared again. We are only human, after all. Men and women ... partnered and single ... young and old ... ordinary people all ... ordinary like the ordinary people that God calls again and again and again in the Bible.

"How can this be?" Mary asks, and we ask the same when we think about the scandal of the incarnation ... that God entered the world through the flesh of Mary ... in the flesh of Jesus. How ordinary he must have appeared. It brings home to me the ridiculous news at the heart of our gospel ... that the eternal Creator God took human form. It makes clear to me why people in the ancient world laughed when the early Christians said they worshipped a common carpenter as God ... a man who had even been crucified by the Romans. It is ridiculous. It is absurd. How can this be? But that is what we believe. God entered the world ... and still enters the world ... through ordinary flesh and blood.

Mary is a marginal member of the world order. She is not wealthy or powerful ... she never will be. She is a young woman in a time and place where women have a prescribed role in society, and it is clearly secondary and subservient. But God chooses her. How can this be? Is God trying to tell us that wealth and status and power and influence and education are superfluous, even meaningless in God's *modus operandi* ... or is the message that if God can use a poor marginal teenager as the instrument of the greatest miracle of all, imagine what God might do if we put our wealth and status and power and influence and education at God's disposal?

God calls, and what God wants us to do leaves us scratching our heads and wondering. How can this be? "How can this be?" asked the hierarchy when Martin Luther said the church had become over-institutionalized and needed to recover grace and faith at the heart of the gospel. And God is still making these strange calls in our own time. "How can this be?" said the old men preachers and deacons when women presented themselves for ordination. "How can this be?" asked the white power structure when Martin Luther King said, "God wants you to let my people go." God's disturbing call keeps doing new things ... coming into the world to spread the love around ... moving us one step closer to the dream that God has for us all.

"How can this be?" Mary asks. And the angel just stands there, smiling, waiting. "How can this be?" Well, it cannot be ... it will not be ... unless Mary says "yes." God's call catches us by surprise, disturbs our plans, and changes everything. We want to say, "You must have the wrong person. You can't use me." We want to say, "Maybe later, when I'm ready ... when I'm a better person ... when I've finished what I want to do." But God uses human instruments to accomplish the Divine purposes. God uses ordinary flesh and blood, yours and mine, "earthen vessels," Paul calls them. So, if we refuse, God's work is blocked, or at least slowed.

Think about it. What if Mary had said, "No, Not me" or "Maybe later when I'm older." But what did Mary say? What did she tell Gabriel even though God's call changed everything and disturbed a lot of people besides just Mary? She said, "Let it be to me according to your word." Just that ...the most courageous words in the Bible and good news for all of us. "Let it be to me according to your word"

Mary's disturbing call disturbs us, too, because it reminds us that we ourselves are not safe from God's tap on our shoulder. If God can find and pick on Mary, there's no place for us to hide, either. During Advent we say are waiting for God to enter our world ... but maybe God is standing before us, smiling, waiting for us to say "let it be to me according to your word." I don't know how God's call may come to you. It may be an angel or a burning bush or some lady preacher from Texas, or it may be losing your job, failing an exam, some hard diagnosis

that you didn't expect. No, I don't know *how* God's call may come to you, but it *will* come in the most ordinary circumstances of your ordinary life ... in the sorrows and tragedies and struggles ... as much as in the joys and thrills and victories. Yes, even in the most difficult moments of your life, suddenly there is God's angel beckoning you forward. And it will come at inconvenient times, when you have a hundred other things to do and suddenly here is an opportunity or a circumstance where God says, "Hey, you!" Sometimes you will feel like somebody has given you a snake instead of the snack you were expecting. And you are only human. Nothing special about you that would make you stand out from a thousand other folks. But God has picked you to bring the love of Christ to birth in this world ... to embody grace in your own flesh and blood. And like Mary, it will bring you joy and wonder ... but it will also bring you sorrow and pain as you carry the wounds of the world in the name of Christ. It will be a disturbing call.

As members of the UCC we believe every Christian has but one vocation ... to carry the love of Christ to the people around us ... whatever our career might be. So, when we talk about Mary's call, we have to consider our own. We have to stop and think ... what does God want me to do ... what commitment do I need to follow through ... what promise do I need to keep ... what relationship do I need to reinvest in ... what sacrificial gift do I need to offer ... what decision do I need to make here and now, today?

For Mary, God's call was not an ending, but a new beginning. It turned her world upside down, but she saw God's salvation come with her own eyes as a collaborator in the new creation. Today we rejoice in God's call again, though it disturbs us. I'm glad God can use an ordinary Jewish teenager like Mary. I'm glad God called me. I'm glad God has called you to minister ... each of you as persons ... all of us as a church. And I encourage you to say "yes" to follow the disturbing call that moves us forward out of our fixed positions into a new creation. What will God call us to do next? What "Yes" is God waiting for from you today? Could there be an angel calling your name right now? Let us pray.

Disturbing God, You come to us and upset our status quo; you turn our world upside down with your transforming grace. We too, like Mary, long to say yes to your inclusive call. But we are afraid. We need your help. Prod us, trouble us, urge us on, and leave us not the same. We pray in the name of the one who makes all things new, Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.