

Micah 5:2-5
Canticle 15
Hebrews 10:5-10
Luke 1:39-45

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The Extraordinary In The Ordinary

Greetings, favored ones. The Lord is with you and will do great things through you. "How can this be?" you might ask. Well, it's because the Holy Spirit is with you and remains with you always and so you are blessed. And because you are blessed, you can go and be a blessing in the world.

That's pretty much what happened between Mary the mother of God and the Angel Gabriel some 2,000 years ago. Mary was doing what she always did when God came calling. It's easy to miss that. We hold Mary up as someone completely "other," someone God actually picked out of all of the people in the whole wide world, to be the mother of Jesus. And that is true. It wasn't Naomi or Ruth or any of the other Mary's that were visited by the Angel Gabriel that day. It was Mary of Nazareth, and because God found favor with her, we tend to think of her as absolutely extraordinary.

But Mary is also very human and in many ways, quite ordinary. While Fra Angelico's Annunciation, the one you see on your bulletin cover, doesn't include Mary's prayer book, Da Vinci's Annunciation does. Even as Mary is utterly taken aback by the Angel Gabriel's visit and his stunning, startling words, Mary's finger holds her place in her prayer book, almost as though she'll be calmly and casually going back to her reading when the angel departs.

You see, Mary is fully human with all the hopes, dreams, heartaches and frailties of every human. Yes, she was a profoundly faithful woman who trusted in God's promises. AND... she was a lot like you and me. It's hard to think of her that way, but she was. Mary was an ordinary girl from a tiny town. And while our tendency is to be captivated by the magnificence of the angel or the other-worldliness of being impregnated by the Holy Spirit, the truth is, there is a lot of ordinariness in this story. Mary was doing what she always was doing, and God came visiting. This happens to us too. The trick is in how we respond to God's visitation.

What do we say, when God comes calling?

A long time ago, I was living my ordinary life right here on Bainbridge Island. I went to work and to my son's games and to PTO meetings during the week, and I went to church on Sundays. Ordinary life. Except for some reason, I cried a lot in church. One day, a priest who was a part of our congregation told me he noticed that I cried a lot in church and he asked me if I was alright. I assured him I was. Some weeks later, he spoke to me again. "I know why you cry in church," he said. Well, that sort of creeped me out because I didn't even know why I was crying in church – not consciously anyway. "I know why you're crying in church," he said, and without skipping a beat he asked "Have you ever considered ordained ministry?" "Yes" I said as though I'd been considering it just 5 minutes ago, when the truth was, I had never consciously thought about it in my entire life. And still, "Yes" was what came

out of my mouth. “Yes” was my truth. “Deacon or priest?” he asked. “Priest,” I said, then promptly burst into tears. And that was the very ordinary beginning of my very extraordinary life as a Priest in God’s one holy, catholic and apostolic church. God came calling, and something in me answered “yes.” That yes didn’t come from my mind, it came from my heart, my Spirit. God’s Holy Spirit called to me and the Spirit within me recognized that call and knew how to answer. I couldn’t have counted on my mind for that “yes.”

That might sound like an extraordinary story, but really, it isn’t. And while it might seem to us extraordinary that Mary and Elizabeth were called to be the God-bearer and the mother of the one who would prepare the way for God in Christ Jesus, that actually wasn’t so extraordinary either. Of course the miracle of incarnation is extraordinary, but God’s choice of Mary, God’s choice of Elizabeth – that was God choosing ordinary people to do and to be extraordinary. Mary was a girl, barely old enough to be betrothed and Elizabeth was so old she couldn’t possibly bear a child. Yet these ordinary women birthed the extraordinary into the world, and all because they actually believed God had blessed them and was calling to them in the context of their ordinary lives. They believed that God saw them, loved them, honored and favored them. They believed that God’s promises were for them. And that, my dears, is what allowed them to say “yes.” It’s what allows us to say “yes” too.

We have to believe that the God to whom all hearts are open, all desires known and from whom no secrets are hid, is God with us. God for us. The God who would say to us just exactly what the Angel Gabriel said to Mary – “Greetings, highly favored ones...” because that is precisely who we are – each one of us and everyone else in the whole wide world is known and highly favored by God. And when we believe that, just like Mary and Elizabeth we too are blessed. And blessing is a powerful, powerful thing.

Do you know that there are only three things that are exclusively the purview of a priest? Only three things the church says I can do that most of you cannot. The first is offering the church’s absolution – that is what I say at the end of confession, absolving you of your sins... almighty God have mercy on you, forgive you all your sins through our Lord Jesus Christ...that’s absolution. The second is consecration – that’s what happens when I say those words at the altar - We pray you, gracious God, to send your Holy Spirit upon these gifts that they may be the Sacrament of the Body of Christ and his blood of the new Covenant – that’s consecrating. And the third thing? That is blessing. The blessing of God almighty, the Father, the Son and Holy Spirit be upon you this day and remain with you always. That’s the church’s blessing and that can only come from a priest. Which is not to say that we all can’t offer each other blessings, and doing that would be a great thing, because there are precious few of us going around blessing the world.

Mostly our world is about measurable goals, about right and wrong about winning and losing, about punishment and reward. We have some idea that we are supposed to get only what we deserve and that our worthiness is somehow dependent upon our behavior rather than God’s grace. The truth is, we’re not worthy so we can just stop talking about that. It’s a relief, really, because it allows us simply to return to God as our source and God’s Holy Spirit as the source of all that is good in us. We don’t need to worry about whether or not we are worthy of God’s love, God’s forgiveness, or even God’s notice. We are not. So we can quit thinking about that and get on with the business of knowing ourselves to be beloved and blessed and because we know that, being able to say “yes” to God.

Mary's yes to God culminates in singing of her God who has blessed her immeasurably, the God who would bless the whole world. She sings of the God who turns the world upside down, and knows herself to be an integral part of that turning. She sings of the God who desires justice and mercy and peace for all people. Mary sings of God's glorious and seemingly impossible world as though it already exists, God's kingdom come among us and not here quite yet. But because Mary knows herself to be blessed and knows God's blessings are for all, she sings God's world into being as if all God's promises had already come true.

God promises to come into the world through us, just as God promised to come into the world through Mary. And Mary said "yes" to God because she knew herself to be God's beloved and blessed. What would it be like if we knew ourselves to be God's beloved and blessed? What would happen if we stopped wondering if we were worthy – whether we were young enough, old enough, important or wealthy enough to make a difference? We could use all of those excuses... or we can simply say "yes."

There are cards in your pews – one of Fra Angelico's beautiful renderings of the Annunciation. And on the back of those cards, you have the opportunity to say yes. In a moment, Paul will play a little music while you consider how you would like to say "Yes" to God. This doesn't have to be the complete and total "Yes", doesn't have to be the perfect "Yes", the "Yes" you'll wish you'd thought of later. It just needs to be a real right here, right now "Yes." What is your heart's desire? What is God calling to in you? What will you say "Yes" to? Is it a commitment to service? To finding work that uses your unique God given gifts? Is it change of attitude, a change of mind or heart?

Find the place where you can say "Yes" so that you too will know the joy of your very own soul glorifying the Lord who has done such great things for you. Your "Yes" is your gift, your offering to God. So when the plate comes round, drop your card in, and offer your gift to the God whose great desire is for you to know the unspeakable joy of "Yes." Amen.