

Let It Be, Luke 1:26-38

This morning is the second Sunday of Advent and we continue with our sermon series focusing on the angels of scripture, the message they brought centuries ago, and the message they bring to us today. Last week, we talked about the angel and the heavenly host that appeared to the shepherds in the field announcing the birth of Christ. Today, we look in on Mary, as she receives the news from the angel Gabriel that she will bear God's son and she will call him Jesus. And in response to the message of the angel, Mary gives herself to God and responds with the famous words, "Let it be."

Read Luke 1:26-38.

In January of 2002, in a hospital in Derbyshire, England, a young clerical worker was diligently trying to get computer generated letters out to 30 patients who were scheduled for surgery. The letters were to carry the news that the surgeries were postponed, but, instead, the clerical worker hit the wrong key and sent 30 letters to unsuspecting patients telling them that they were pregnant. Among the recipients of the letters were six elderly men.

75 year old Cyril Pacey from Derbyshire was among those who received the letter. When asked by the local newspaper about his reaction, Cyril stated: "I was astounded. I called everybody I knew to see who the father was! Its certainly a novel way to get the wait list down." The hospital has since changed its procedures after this significant blunder.

In our scripture passage for today, the recipient of such news is not a 75 year old man, but is a young woman named Mary, who is stunned nevertheless. News of a surprise pregnancy is always a shock. Sometimes it's a good shock, sometimes it's a bad shock, but its always a shock.

Mary is a teenage girl, coming from a common family, and recently engaged to marry Joseph. Her life is established for her – she doesn't have the choices that women of today have. She grew up in her parents home, and when her parents decide she should marry, then she gets married. Her parents choose a husband for her and she gets engaged. It goes without saying that she is not to be with any other men while she is betrothed to

Joseph. That would be simply unthinkable. Her path is set – her course is straight – she will marry Joseph and bear his children and take care of her family. She will be an ordinary woman leading an ordinary life. That is her path in life.

But God has other plans for Mary. Scripture tells us that the angel Gabriel was sent by God to Mary to deliver a message. Indeed, that is the function of angels – to be messengers of God – or *angelos* in the Greek meaning “messenger.” *Malak* in the Hebrew, also meaning messenger or “the one who is sent.” Angels always come with a message from God – the question then becomes: “What will the human being do with that message? Will he/she obey the message or not?”

The scene begins when Gabriel says to Mary, “Greetings favored one – the Lord is with you!” Scripture says that Mary is “perplexed” by these words, but clearly, her face shows fear, because the next thing Gabriel says to her is, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God.” Indeed, “Do not be afraid” is the most common statement from the mouths of all of the angels in scripture. “Do not be afraid,” sometimes translated “Fear not.” Why? Because everyone is afraid when they see a holy messenger from God standing in front of them – a living example of the power of Almighty God right there. Everyone is afraid, even folks today are afraid of the power of God. Let me give you an example:

On Sept. 11, 2001, terrorists attacked the United States by taking over several planes that were flying to various cities. One of those planes, flight 93, crashed in Shanksville, Pennsylvania. The first person on the scene was an FBI agent named Lilly Leonardi. When she arrived, she was stunned by the burning pine and the jet fuel stinging her nostrils. She was stunned by what she saw – no airplane, no bodies, just a smoldering crater littered with debris. It was as if the earth had just swallowed up the entire plane with everyone on it.

But as she looked, as she stared at this horrific crash scene, Lilly began to see a different sight. In her words, “Shimmery light appeared and that’s when I first saw the angels there.” They were appearing around the perimeter of the crash site, many of them, but she couldn’t see their faces, and just as Pastor Stu said last week about the heavenly host, Lilly said they were dressed in warrior garb, like Roman Centurions. The angel leader

knew she was there – and she knew that he was a messenger from God. His job was to let her know that God was there; her job was to tell others what she saw.

But just as Mary was so afraid of the angel Gabriel, so Lilly was too terrified to tell anyone that day, or the next, or the next. In fact, Lilly kept quiet about it for almost two years because she was afraid that people would think her insane. She finally began telling others about the angels, including her boss at the FBI, because she believed that she needed to tell the message of comfort to the families of the victims. “Be not afraid Lilly, for God is here.” Be not afraid. That was the message. The person who is receiving the message from God must be able to overcome the initial fear and respond to the message the angels bring. It just takes some folks longer than others to respond, “Let it be.”

No one knows how long Mary and the angel Gabriel stood together with Mary showing fear in her face, but eventually Gabriel told her, “You have found favor with God. You will conceive in your womb and bear a son and you will name him Jesus.” And Mary replied, “How can this be, since I am a virgin?” “The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the most high will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called the Son of God.” This was her assignment; a message straight from God through the angel Gabriel. God is asking Mary to veer from the plan that she and her parents had for her – common woman, wife and mother, and to accept instead this plan from God. This is Mary’s calling-to bear the son of God. This is the life that God wants her to have; a life different than that which she imagined for herself.

Mary contemplates this extraordinary message and then responds, “Let it be to me according to thy word.” Let it be. This “let it be” is not giving up; this “let it be” is not caving in; no, this “let it be” is accepting the God given calling for her life – the plan that God had only for her – that’s the “Let it be.” She doesn’t want her will to get in the way, so she says, “Let it be.”

And Mary says “let it be” even though she knows that to be an unmarried, pregnant girl is going to cause her and her family a whole lot of problems and social shame. She says “let it be” even though it may cost her the marriage to Joseph. She says “let it be” even though she has no idea what the future will bring – being the mother of God -a future that we know will cause her immense heartbreak as she sits at the foot of the cross and

watches her son die a painful, agonizing death. It's not a perfect life, it's not going to be a perfect life. She steps out into the future that God is giving her, trusting and believing that being in God's hands is the best place to be. And so should we, my friends.

We need to listen for God's message – whether it comes from an angel or some other more earthly source. We need to listen for God's message, maybe coming through His Word, maybe coming through a Christian friend or loved one. We need to listen for God's message and not just for our own feelings and desires. We need to listen for God's message even if its hard to hear, even if it is difficult to follow, even if it requires a complete change in course for us. **We need to move from who we think we are to what God calls us to be. We need to be the ones, in 2014, who are willing to say “Let it be to me according to thy word.”**

Today is the second Sunday of advent and our candle is peace. My friends, true peace can be found only in Jesus Christ. True peace can be found only in believing him, trusting him and following him in our lives. True peace can be found only in becoming the people Christ calls us to be, and when he calls, we need to be ready to say “Let It Be.” Praise be to God. Amen.