

WHEN GOD SNEAKS UP ON YOU

Luke 1:26-38

Sermon preached by Dr. Cahill

Babcock Presbyterian Church

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This is a true story. A hospital in London mistakenly sent letters to over 300 patients informing them they were pregnant. Among the recipients, were six elderly men.

I'm sure their response was just like Mary's. "How can this be?"

Of course most of these 300 patients realized right away there was a mistake and had a good laugh, unlike Mary who was initially perplexed and afraid, but by the time her encounter with Gabriel ended was left awed and humbled by the mystery of God and becoming a chosen participant in God's divine plan, not only for her life, but for everybody's, including you and me.

Last Sunday we touched on the predicament Mary found herself in. She was a virgin and her finance Joseph had no reason to think otherwise, putting Mary was in great danger. If word got out, she'd be a social outcast, or even worse, stoned to death.

But despite her vulnerable situation, Mary proved to be a woman of deep faith. By the grace of God she accepted her calling, without reservation, to be the mother of God. Think of it, one minute she was a young lady preparing for her wedding day until she had that divine interruption that changed everything. From then on she had to grow up fast, trusting her life to God, trusting God would convince Joseph to also accept the interruption in his life, plus trusting that somehow God was using both of them for a wonderful purpose. Pretty heady stuff for a sixteen year old!

Did you ever wonder why God interrupted Mary's nice life, that is, why was Mary singled out to bear the Christ Child and raise him to manhood? There's no evidence in the scriptures hinting Mary was either supernatural or sinless. In fact when you read the Gospels you learn she was later so confused and doubtful when her son began his ministry, she sent his brothers out to bring Jesus back home because, she was afraid he went stark raving mad. So in some respects Mary was just like any of us.

So why did God choose Mary to be the mother of Jesus? What was in her resume, what were her qualifications? Was there a special chromosome in her DNA so she'd readily agree to go through with it, despite the dangers she'd experience?

We have one clue and we get it from Gabriel's message to Mary.

"Greetings favored one! The Lord is with you... for you have found favor with God."
(Luke 1:28-30)

It wasn't something about Mary as much as it was something about God. She found favor with God, by grace. By that I mean God found favor with her not because she was good, but because God is good. Please believe me, I'm not suggesting Mary wasn't an extraordinary personality, but no more so than any of the others God called into servant hood from Abraham up until the present time. Like them, God interrupted her ordinary life to carry out an extraordinary task to be someone only one person could ever be, the one who carried the Christ Child in her womb.

Please don't take from what I'm saying that I'm somehow deprecating Mary's role in salvation history. I'm just saying she was human like the rest of us.

But undeniably she did have an extraordinary faith. Compare how she responded to her calling with the way Moses or the other biblical heroes responded to theirs. Moses in particular hemmed and hawed, and made one excuse after another, trying to wiggle out of it, but Mary immediately said, "Yes." You might chalk it up to the adolescent invincibility syndrome, that is, she didn't know what she was getting into, but events proved otherwise. She immediately accepted the challenges of her calling with grace by grace. In other words God gave her what God gives the rest of us, the potential to achieve greatness but unlike a lot of us, she took it, no questions asked.

I alluded to this earlier: Mary wasn't the first to have God sneak up on her unexpectedly. Before Moses, God interrupted Abraham's retirement, had him pull up stakes in his seventy-fifth year and move hundreds of miles away to a strategically located piece of real estate at the crossroads of the Mediterranean world so his descendants would have the opportunity to meet and be a blessing to all the nations of the known world at that time.

Then there were the prophets. Isaiah and later Jeremiah were both born into the powerful priestly caste but their lives were interrupted when God called them to go back and challenge their relatives and former colleagues who ran the temple to boldly speak truth to power. And whenever God did call anyone for a specific purpose, the deeper they got into it the more it became apparent to them that they had to set aside their puny preconceived notions of God's intentions and give themselves over to God's greater expectations. Of course, God didn't expect any of them to have it all figured out, God only required them to submit, and trust that even when they went way out on a limb for God and became frightened and overwhelmed, sooner or later God's hidden purposes would be revealed and God's plan for salvation would be another step closer to completion.

Here's a quote that's worth remembering. "A hallmark of being a faithful disciple is keeping the quiet confidence that no matter what happens to you God is still in control without you having the need to understand why God does what he does."

What was Mary's answer to the Angel Gabriel? "I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me as you have said." God gave Mary the grace to trust that even though her life was interrupted by a surprise pregnancy, that was part of God's plan and God's promise to Mary

enabled her to remain calm in the storm about to break because God empowered Mary to be equal to the task.

In his book "Road to New Life" Alan Walker tells of a young girl who had a beautiful voice and sang in her church choir. Her reputation spread until one December she was invited to sing one of the lead parts in the Messiah, "I Know That My Redeemer Liveth," at a huge auditorium in the city.

Her closest friend went to this girl's teacher. "Is she over her head? Do you think she can pull it off? Is she equal to the task?"

The teacher responded, "If she tries to remember what I taught her and only tries consciously to follow the rules of correct breathing and voice production, she will break down. But if she can forget everything and center on the wonder of the message she's singing, she'll do just fine."

When Mary received the message she was pregnant, she could have obsessed on everything bad that might happen to her. But instead she focused on the wonderful message and the power of God flowing in and through her.

"But why wouldn't Mary respond so quickly to God?" you might be thinking. "After all God chose her before she was conceived in her mother's womb. God did encode in Mary's spiritual DNA all the right stuff, the ability to trust, take risks, be brave and be quick about it.

And I'd be the first to agree with you. All these things are true. God created Mary to live at the right place at the right time. God gave her the right stuff, personality and maternal instincts to raise the Son of God to manhood. God gave her everything she ever needed. She lacked nothing, God provided everything from A to Z.

And you know what? The same is true of you! God created you to live at the right place and the right time. God gave you the right personality and instincts to do whatever God created you to be and do for the greater good. God, at your conception, provided you with everything from A to Z.

Therefore, having said all this, as they say in Brooklyn, N.Y., "Whad a ya gonna do about it?"

You take my point? You're really no different than Mary, except maybe for being less proactive in the way you live out your faith. She responded magnificently when God needed her most. She could've, like Jonah, run away as far as she could. She could've had the fetus aborted to save her reputation. The possibilities of what she could've, should've done to save herself are endless. But what did Jesus say some thirty some years later? "Those who try to save their life will lose it, but those who lose their lives will save it." (Luke 17:33)

In other words, if you spend all your life trying to protect yourself and your interests, at the expense of God and others like the unrepentant Ebenezer Scrooge, there will be countless missed opportunities to do something good and important for Christ and your neighbor in need. Your life will be weighed in the balance, and you will be found wanting.

Unless, you follow Mary's example. Maybe you can't carry Christ in your womb, but you can carry Christ in your heart, mind, soul and strength and fulfill your own purpose in life for Christ and his Kingdom.

We are only hours away from December the twenty-fifth, an artifice date to be sure, but still a bench mark in our earthly journey to the manger, the cross and finally the empty tomb. Christmas day points to God's Christmas Presence through the Christ Child who grew to manhood to spend his life giving himself away to anyone who'd make room in their hearts by faith and gladly receive him and the call to discipleship. Christmas, literally meaning Christ's Mass, reveals God's willingness to come down and sacrifice himself for us because God so loved the world.

You can't separate Christ's birth from Christ's passion. You can't have one without the other. Christ was born to die for our sins, but, Christ was also born to be resurrected, and raise us up with him to the new life promised in the scriptures.

Mary believed and she willingly gave herself to God so she could fulfill the purpose she was born for.

Now it's your turn. Take it and be not be afraid.

Amen.