

Accepting

Isaiah 42:1-9

Crossroads Christian Church

Luke 1:26-38

December 6, 2015 Advent 2 (ol)

Earlier today, in our special Sunday School class on the Church Year, we explored how the entire church year is a journey, as we follow the story of Jesus and the church with each passing season. Within that larger journey, we're on an Advent journey. We're not following the lectionary as much as usual on this particular Advent, but it is still a journey. The journey began last Sunday with Waiting—longing anticipation for the coming of the Messiah. Today we'll talk about Accepting, and explore how Mary and Joseph accepted their roles in God's divine plan. The next two parts of the journey will be Traveling next Sunday and Birthing on December 20. Each Sunday we'll draw closer to the cradle at Bethlehem.

Luke's Gospel begins the Advent story by telling us of an older couple, Zechariah and Elizabeth. Elizabeth, like Hannah who we talked about a few weeks ago, and like Sarah, Abraham's wife, had tried for many years to bear a child, but was unable. Elizabeth and Zechariah were both descendants of Aaron, and Zechariah served in the Temple in Jerusalem on a schedule determined by casting lots. One day, he went into the Holy Place by himself to burn incense. The other worshipers, including his wife Elizabeth, waited for him to finish, to come out and deliver a blessing. But this was no ordinary day. The archangel Gabriel appeared, with a surprising, no, an astonishing, message. The old couple would have a child; they were to name him John; he would bring the couple much joy; he would be raised, like Samuel, Hannah's son, as a Nazirite, dedicated to God; he would minister in the manner of Elijah, whom prophets said would come back one day to herald the coming of the Messiah.

The message was too much for the old priest, who had his doubts. He was stricken speechless. He came out, confused, gesturing, trying to help people make sense—trying to help himself make sense—of the vision he had received. So they returned to their home in the hill country, Elizabeth conceived, and the couple learned to accept the promise of God.

The next step in the journey would come when Gabriel would appear to Mary, and offer her the opportunity to bear the Son of God. I love what Fred Craddock said about it. "In one sense this story is as different from the preceding story as a young virgin differs from an old couple advanced in years. However, the reader is most aware of how closely parallel the two accounts are. Both are stories of God's initiative of grace and power; of grace in that what is soon to happen will express God's favor toward the world; of power in that God can work through the unable, an old couple and an unmarried girl. Elizabeth and Mary will have sons because God is able; they will have sons for our sake because God is gracious."¹ (unquote)

¹ Fred Craddock, *Luke*, Interpretation Commentaries, John Knox Press, 1990, pp.26-27.

Let's get back to Gabriel. Now God saved Gabriel for the really important messages. He was an archangel—God's press secretary. How amazing it was when the angel greeted her, saying that she, Mary, had found God's favor. What an incredible, totally unrealistic thing that God was offering to do through Mary—through Mary, a child would be born who would save the world, who would turn the world on its ear. Mary responded, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" She wasn't objecting, just clarifying the details.

"The Holy Spirit will overshadow you, and the child you will bear will be called holy," responded Gabriel. He explained how her older cousin Elizabeth was now expecting a child from God, and said, "With God, nothing is impossible."

"I am the Lord's servant" Mary responded. "Let it be with me just as you have said." Mary said yes to God. Mary obeyed God. She could have said no. She probably knew that rumors would fly, that people would assume the worst, but their opinions didn't matter—God's will was all that mattered, and her chance to be an agent in God's plan. She accepted God's offer with joy and awe.

And how joyful it was to know that she had a friend, a dear friend, one who would understand. Gabriel had told Mary that her cousin Elizabeth was carrying a son, one whom we know would grow up to be John the Baptist. Mary traveled several days journey over difficult terrain, so they could share in each other's good news. They were an odd couple in a way, a very mature woman 6 months pregnant, wife of a priest, who had thought she was too old to bear a child, and this teenaged girl, this child carrying a child—but they both knew the joy that came from discovering God wasn't working through the kings or high priests, but through them. Two poor, powerless women would help God initiate a world of peace and justice. The story tells us how Elizabeth's son jumped for joy when Mary and the son she carried arrived. Then Elizabeth blessed Mary, saying "Happy is she who believed that the Lord would fulfill the promises he made to her." And Mary replied with a song of praise, the one which we read during our call to worship this morning—My soul glorifies the Lord.

God hadn't chosen princes or princesses, God hadn't chosen emperors or empresses, God hadn't chosen the rich and the famous to transform the world. God had chosen a priest's wife and a carpenter's fiancé to set things in motion for the coming of the Messiah. The world's values were turned upside down, and the Messiah who came would turn the world upside down. The world was ruled from the top down. God transformed the world from the bottom up. Emperors had declared themselves sons of God, and the rest of us were mere mortals. God, through Jesus, said that all of us were children of God. We aren't measured by our wealth and power or popularity. We are measured not by the gold standard, but by the love standard.

So Elizabeth and Mary accepted God's invitation to be a part of God's plan. In Matthew 1, we find a chagrined and embarrassed Joseph, utterly flabbergasted at the news that his fiancé was bearing a child that was not his. He could have had her publicly censured as unfaithful to her vows of engagement; he could have had her stoned as an adulteress. But he was righteous—not in the holier-than-thou, self-important sense, rather in the true sense of the word. He wanted a right relationship with God and with Mary. So he decided quietly to call off the engagement. Then an angel appeared in a dream—might it have been busy Gabriel again?—and said, "Joseph son of David, don't be afraid to take Mary as your wife, because the child she carries was conceived by the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you will call him Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."

Joseph had the faith and love and imagination to accept that message from a dream. He took Mary as his wife and later would raise Jesus as his beloved son.

These two stories together show us what wonderful things can happen when we accept God's will in our lives. God's offer to enter into our lives and transform them isn't like the Godfather's—"I'll make you an offer you can't refuse." Rather, God gives us the option to accept or reject, because God wants us to act on our own free will. God doesn't want robots programmed to carry out tasks. God wants people who will joyfully and freely say yes. When we do accept God's love, God's will, into our lives, wonderful things happen. Remember what Gabriel said to Mary? "With God, nothing is impossible." It's no longer what we can do; it's what God can do through us.

God invites us to accept Jesus as Savior, and offers us the gift of salvation. But it doesn't end there. God invites us to accept Jesus as Lord, and that's a day-to-day, way of life sort of thing. Where we used to be anxious to get our own way, to achieve our own goals at the expense of others, now we listen to others, we care for them, and we do what's best for them. Where we used to hoard, now we share. Where we used to judge, now we forgive. Where we used to build high the walls of our own little castle, now we let down our defenses to love others. Where we used to look down on people who are different from us, who are poorer than us, who are of different race or ethnicity than us, now we receive them as our brothers and sisters in Christ. We become people of peace. We become children of the light. That's what we're made to do. That's what God wants us to do and be. Accept God's invitation and wonderful things will happen. Amen.

By Michael Dixon