

LET IT BE

Luke 1: 26-38

December 21, 2008

(4 ADVENT, YR. B)

**My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior;
All people now will call me blessed;
for he has loved the lowliness of his handmaid.
The Almighty has shown me great favor,
holy is his name.
His mercy extends through generations,
toward those who revere him.
He has revealed his arm in power,
scattering the proud in their own conceit.
He has dethroned the powerful
and lifted up the lowly.
The famished have been filled with his bounty,
the rich have been sent away empty.
He has always helped Israel, his servant,
true to his loving kindness,
just as he promised our ancestors,
to Abraham and his descendants for ever.**

Somewhere in the great Midwest, a church not so different from *this* church was doing what we did here *last* Sunday. It was the Sunday of the annual Christmas Cantata. And just like us they had a bit of excitement that Sunday. Though it happened at the beginning of the service instead of the end. Which is worse, I think. (If there *is* a better or worse when it comes to these things.) But part of the tradition for the Third Sunday of Advent, or *The Sunday of Joy*, in that church had to do with the *processional carol*. The choir would come down the aisle singing, “O Come, All Ye Faithful.” And at the end of the service they would go out singing Charles Wesley’s great Christmas hymn, “Hark! the Herald Angels Sing!” It was tradition. That’s what they did.

And, as I say, it was a small town church out in the heartland of America. And the sanctuary was just lovely. Wainscoting around the walls, and beautiful arches and woodwork up above. And stained glass windows with lots of reds and blues. And a small pipe organ that was just right for a church of that size. A lovely church with a lovely sanctuary, heated by an old-fashioned floor furnace.

Do you remember them? They used to get me in trouble when I was a kid. Because in the wintertime, I'd come in from the cold and stand there on the grating to get warm. And I'd stand there just a little too long, I guess. And my mom would sense the faint odor of burning rubber as the soles of my shoes started to melt. And those were not some of her happier moments, believe me. But I thought it was so neat to have tennis shoe soles that looked like Belgian waffles -- or a giant tic-tack-to on my toes.

And that's what they had there in that church. They had a floor furnace. And the grating was right there in the center of the aisle.

But anyway, the choir started down the aisle on the third Sunday of Advent, and they were walking in procession one by one. Full of warmth and dignity in their new choir robes. And each person was exactly two-point-five pews behind the person in front of them. With the cross and the acolytes leading the way. And just as the last alto got half-way down the aisle, she stepped on the furnace -- on the grating, I mean. And ... well, she had bought a new pair of heels to

wear for the Christmas cantata. And they were nice shoes. Same color as the choir robe. But the heels were thin -- about as big around as a no. 2, Ticonderoga pencil, I'd say. And one of them went through the grating and stuck there. And she tugged at it a few times and shook her foot. (I've seen horses do something a lot like that.)

She tugged and shook. But it was stuck. And the tenor behind her was getting closer. So with all the grace and dignity she could rally, she slipped her foot out of the shoe and went floppily hobbling up the aisle with one shoe off and one shoe on.

Now the tenor who was coming up behind her looked down and realized what had happened. And he knew -- he just knew if that shoe was left sticking up in the middle of the aisle, people would see it and, as the old revival preachers used to say, it would "break up the meeting." The place would just roar with laughter. So, quick thinker that he was, he reached down, grabbed the shoe, and gave it a good, hard twist.

And it shocked him, I think. 'Cause when he pulled the shoe up, the entire grate came up with it. And he was so stunned by this, I guess, that he just kept on processing. Marching in time with the music, with a floor grate and a shoe in his hand. ✚ Two-point-five pews behind him, of course, there was another tenor - a near-sighted, bespectacled, bifocal-wearing tenor, with his nose in his hymnal so he could see. And he stepped right into it. Fell right into the hole.

I had a teacher in seminary -- he's a bishop now in Alabama -- and he used to say, "These things happen for a reason. It's to help us understand what the first Christmas was *really* like." It wasn't all polished and perfected. It didn't happen the way anyone expected it to. It caught them off guard. Hit them unaware, right out of the blue. And somebody was embarrassed. And somebody was nervous. And somebody surely didn't know what to do. And I've a feeling, Mary and Joseph felt a little off balance. A little awkward, maybe. Like they were hobbling along. And like that poor unsuspecting, near-sighted tenor, they probably felt as though they'd *really* stepped *into* it.

Just look at poor Mary. A girl in her mid teens, maybe. Not a queen or a princess, or even the daughter of some well-to-do businessman. She was just an ordinary young girl. From a not-so-well-to-do place called Nazareth. A small town girl. And like most people those days, her family probably had a hard time making ends meet. 'Cause they were nearly taxed to death by the government to begin with. And most of the tax-collectors [themselves] were as crooked as a back road in *MacDowell* county.... That's why they always talked about *tax-collectors* and *sinner*s in the same breath.

Times were hard. The living was not easy. And living in Nazareth, of all places ... it was like that old song John Denver used to sing about Toledo. "Saturday night in Toledo, Ohio is like being no place at all," he would sing. And that was Nazareth. Not much happening there. Until one night a stranger came with a message for Mary, the young girl in her teens. And when he found her he greeted her. "**Hail!**" he said. People said that in those days. It was like saying "**Hello!**" It even comes from the same word.

“Hail! Favored one,” he said. ***“You are highly favored. The LORD is with YOU.”***

And it caught her completely off guard. She thought, “Who is this? What does he want with me?” After all, she was young. This had never happened before. Not to her, I mean. And she wasn’t too sure what was happening now.

And Gabriel, the messenger, said, ***“Don’t be afraid, Mary. It is God who favors you. The Lord is with you.”*** Oh, can you imagine? She was so young. Barely more than a child. And she was from Nazareth, for heaven’s sake. What would God want to do with such an ordinary young person from such an ordinary place? But the messenger went on. ***“You’re going to have a baby, Mary. You’re going to conceive... in your womb... and give birth. To a son.”***

This was no ordinary greeting, mind you. And he was no ordinary messenger. He was God’s messenger. An angel, mind you. The angel Gabriel. The one who announced in Old Testament times that Messiah would come and turn the whole world upside down

and bring in the Kingdom of God. That same angel-messenger was talking to ***her!*** ***God favors you. God chooses you. God wants you to know that you will conceive. You will give birth.*** He even gave her the child’s name. ***“You will name him Jesus,”*** he said. [It means *Savior*.] ***That’s what you’ll name him.***

And there’s more, there’s more. ***This child,*** said God’s messenger, ***will be great. And he will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord will give to him the throne of his ancestor David.*** Did you hear that? He’ll be a king, Mary. King of all God’s people. And Gabriel the messenger, the very one who appeared in Old Testament times and announced that the Messiah would come and bring in God’s Kingdom, looked at Mary and said, ***And of his kingdom THERE WILL BE NO END.***

She’d never heard such a thing. You wonder what kept her from laughing like Sarah when the angel said that *she* would give birth ... when she was old. Or why she didn’t say, “Oh, my Lord, you must be mistaken. You’re looking for some *other* Mary.” You wonder

what kept her from fainting, or stumbling, or running away. But for some reason she didn't She just looked up at the angel and said, "How can this be? I'm not even married. I've never *been* with a man, with *any* man.

And this is what the messenger said. **The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. And the child will be holy** [It means "set apart"]. **For you see, Mary, he won't just be *your* Son. This child will be *GOD'S* son.** And the angel wanted her to know that she wasn't just imagining all of this or dreaming a dream, so he said, "Mary, remember your cousin Elizabeth? She's in her old age, now. Well past the child-bearing years. And yet, she too will give birth to a son. In fact, she's already in her sixth month... For you see, Mary, nothing will be impossible for God.

Nothing. Nothing is ever impossible with God, our God.

Sarah laughed. Abraham doubted. Moses said, "I've got such a temper, Lord, and I'm not a good speaker.

And Jeremiah the prophet said, "I'm too young." And Isaiah said, "My lips are unclean." And Peter said, "Go away, I'm a sinner." And Paul had to be knocked off his horse by a blinding light before he'd even listen to God. ✠ But Mary stepped into it. But not by accident, mind you... like that poor tenor on the processional carol. No. Mary stepped into it whole-heartedly. Knowing full well that somehow she would have to find some way to explain all of this to her fiancé, Joseph. And her family. Her parents! Can you imagine trying to explain such a thing to your parents? "It's not what you think. Joseph had nothing to do with it."

"Then who? Tell me his name!"

"It was God. This is God's baby. I'm still ... I'm still a virgin."

Mary stepped into it. She didn't run away. She didn't bargain and plead and beg the dear Lord to pick somebody else. She just stepped right into it, risking everything, and yet so full of grace and trust in the One who called her -- the One who favored her. ✠ Mary looked at the angel Gabriel and said, "Behold the

handmaid of the Lord.” She said, “What you see is the Lord’s servant. So be it. Let it be with me according to your word.” ✠ It reminds you of something Jesus said, years later when God asked *him* to do the impossible. He said, “**Father, not my will but yours be done.**”

And the messenger-angel departed from her -- Mary, maiden mild, the servant-mother of our Lord.

L

Well, here we are. Ordinary people. In an ordinary town. We’re young and old, with unclean lips, and unclean thoughts, and not-so-good tempers, and not-so-good pasts. And every one of us a sinner. And yet, this day God sends you his greetings. And in that greeting there is a message, not so different from the one the angel Gabriel delivered to Mary. And that message is, “**Hail, favored ones. The Lord is with you. You are blessed.**” And like Mary the mother of Jesus, he calls us to carry something holy within. He calls us, like her, to give birth. To let something holy and good be born from our relationship with him. Something that will call the hearts of others to turn to him. And it

may be risky. You may lose your reputation. You may lose friends. Jesus said you may even lose your life [in this world]. But Christ will be born anew -- not just in *your* life, but in the Church, in this church, in this place, here in this world. **FOR NOTHING IS IMPOSSIBLE WITH GOD.....** And God is *here*. God is *with us*. God is with *YOU*.

Mary said, “Let it be ... Let it be with me according to your word.” And an ordinary young girl became the mother of our Lord. And something like that happens when we say yes to God’s call -- when we listen to his voice and follow his lead. We become more and more, children of the Church -- who carry our brother Jesus to others. (*My mother and my brothers and my sisters are those who do the will of my Father.*) **L**

Have you ever heard of a thing called Santa Claus Anonymous? It sounds like a twelve-step program for recovering elves. But it’s a group that provides gifts for children in need. Children who otherwise wouldn’t receive any Christmas gifts. And several years ago, an eleven-year-old boy heard about them at school. He was an ordinary boy, in an ordinary place called

Paine's Hollow, New York. And he heard the voice of a messenger ...it wasn't an angel, really. It was the principal. And he was speaking to the whole school. -- Mohawk Central School -- over the intercom. But when this boy, this eleven-year-old boy heard it, it was like a message from God, in a way. And what God, or the principal rather, was asking him to do was to help these poor children. The needy and the lonely and the brokenhearted. So the boy started saving every penny he could. And it was a struggle, but on the Friday before Christmas break he had *fifteen cents*. And he planned to do his part and turn it in at school that day.

But there was a terrible snow storm, the kind they have only in New England. A real blizzard it was. So the school buses didn't run that morning. But this is what he did. That boy -- that eleven-year-old boy waded through the deep snow and the wind and the cold to give his fifteen cents to the school principal. And the principal found it terribly hard to control himself as he accepted the gift. The fifteen cents. Because the boy who was eleven, almost twelve, was

one of the poor, needy children listed to receive a Christmas present from *Santa Claus Anonymous*.

And there in that ordinary place, in the heart of an ordinary man, Christ was born anew. Mightily and sweetly. Gently carried in the heart and life of a young boy.

Listen ... Do you hear? An angel, God's messenger is speaking to your heart. ***Hail, you who are highly favored. The Lord is with you.*** Will you bear the Christ in *your* life? Will you let him be born anew in your life? In this church? And in the hearts and lives of the people around you?

Behold the servants of the Lord. Let it be with us according to your word. Let it be....

This is the word which is given for you. Amen.

SOLI DEO GLORIA

BENE, OBLISB

