

## Sermon - Deacon Woodling

### Fourth Sunday of Advent 2011

Greetings! Favored Ones! The Lord is with you!

I am not an angel but I am the messenger today—and I bring Good News that God is with us, God is planting seeds of God's spirit within us, so I want us to consider what God is asking of us today. How is God asking us to be God Bearers.

What is being born in us? How is the Holy Spirit moving in, around and through our lives? What is God asking us to say YES to on this fourth Sunday of Advent, with Jesus's birthday just a few days away?

In the Gospel, Gabriel comes to Mary and makes this spectacular announcement of what is going to grow in her—how the Holy Spirit will come upon her and make all things possible. This moment is now called The Annunciation—it is clearly THE Annunciation of all times—it also could be considered a frightening if not traumatic experience, maybe not only for Mary but for the Angel as well.

Frederick Buechner, a favorite writer of mine who wrote a commentary on this Gospel passage:

“She struck the angel Gabriel as hardly old enough to have a child at all, let alone this child, but he'd been entrusted with a message to give her and he gave it. He told her what the child was to be named, and who he was to be, and something about the mystery that was to come upon her. ‘You mustn't be afraid, Mary,’ he said.

And as he said it, he only hoped she wouldn't notice that beneath the great, golden wings, he himself was trembling with fear to think that the whole future of creation hung now on the answer of a girl.”

The whole of creation—all the hopes and fears and dreams of all the years—are waiting on Mary's answer.

What IF, the whole of creation is now waiting on our answer to God's question for us?

I asked a kindergarten class a couple of weeks ago, when I was telling this story, what would they do if an angel flew into their classroom and began to deliver a message from God. One smart young man said, “I would hide under the table.”

His response made me question—What would I do--What would we do—and could we stand courageously, as Mary did, before such an awesome visitation?

This passage is of course about announcing that a baby is on the way. This is usually good news, not traumatic. I had to wait a few years to hear this announcement for myself the first time, and often wondered if I would ever have a child. I even went to a doctor whose first name was Abraham—which I thought appropriate since I was beginning to feel like a Sarah! - on my first visit—he assured me I would have a baby, though I still didn't believe him—I thought it was impossible. And I thought that was a very brave message for him to deliver—maybe he was also trembling inside as Buechner suggested Gabriel was, hoping for me that I would have a baby.

On the second or third visit to this doctor's office, Abraham—my angel-- announced that I was expecting — and it was an announcement of great joy.

Now I have three sons—and I am fortunate to say that those three days, when it was announced to me that I was having a baby, and then the three days those boys were born, when another doctor announced, “It’s a Boy!” have been the six happiest days of my life. But this may not be the case for others, when God brings unexpected news to us through his messengers.

Some announcements may not be so joyous. And it doesn’t have to be the announcement of an unexpected baby’s arrival that can be disturbing or earth-changing—it could be anything we are being asked to do that **seems impossible**.

God asks many things of each one of us—that we, at first, may respond—NO, Please, NO—this cannot be possible, this cannot be happening. I am not capable of doing what you are asking. In earthly experiences we have angels like priests and counselors, friends and family who can sit trembling with us—at the woeful sound of our NO to something that seems awful and impossible.

Mary seems to be hearing her news—her message-- all alone! How could we stand bravely like Mary did before such a request as she received? Or then even be able to hear so clearly and precisely what it is that God wants us to do! And then say, “YES—Let it be as you have said.”

During our Advent Quiet Day for the parish a couple of weeks ago, we read this Gospel scripture and pondered its meaning. One of the participants suggested that after Gabriel said that first sentence--- told Mary she was to have a baby and no less the Son of God--Mary heard nothing that followed—the rest of Gabriel’s words came into her brain as static—garbled, incomprehensible--a blah—blah—blah—interlude, --until she collects herself and she asks that very intelligent question, “But how can this be, since I am a virgin.” Mary is assured that God is with her. When she gathers herself and ponders the message, she takes a deep breath as the angel waits, and she says **yes**; She says yes to God and that has made all the difference in the world. The whole of creation resounded with great joy at her **yes!** Yet, we still wonder, how did she do this?!

Think about Mary’s circumstances for a few moments. For Mary, she was a young woman, a girl really, now pregnant and unmarried,---and who is going to believe that story about the angel and the Holy Spirit!?? Anyway!!

She is the least in her culture. She could have been one of those throwaway children—the one abandoned, shunned, maybe even physically punished for her circumstances. And her child could have been a throwaway child as well. But she says yes and Joseph says yes—and they birthed and raised this precious child. They became the God-bearers—bearing God’s Love out into the world.

I think there are many situations people can find themselves in, that are desperate and frightening, circumstances like Mary’s or worse -- a young girl, a homeless man, someone without a job, without a reliable partner or friend, without a community, without a safety net of any kind, in circumstances where the culture will undoubtedly question one’s integrity or virtue, or initiative.

When we compare Mary and her baby to those in our midst who can be the invisible, the ignored, if not the abused--Those possibilities are what places this Powerful Gospel at the heart of our faith, and allows it to resonate in each of our hearts.

Who are our angels? Who is helping God deliver those messages to us? Are we prepared to hear the prophetic voices of the angels in our midst? Maybe it is something we have said NO to before that is now time to reconsider. Maybe your time or my time is coming and coming soon like Christmas. What is God asking of us during this season of Advent? It is good and right to ponder these things in our hearts today—a week before the holy morn of Christmas. This parish has been engaged in many projects to help others; we have been called by God as a parish to be a beacon of hope in this neighborhood and community—“a city on the hill— a loving community in the Fields of suburban Atlanta—we have been called to feed the hungry, to clothe the naked, to give hope to those without hope. These all are certainly **yesses** we have said to God.

And we should continue to ponder especially the plight of children in these times and their parents, a parent maybe like Mary and a child maybe like her baby, who have the potential to change the world—to bring hope to renew all Creation! To become God Bearers themselves.

We can't help but think about those things we have said no to and about others who have said **no** to what they have been asked to do. For one reason or another, a parent cannot or will not take care of a child given to them by God. There are many of these throwaway children in every community in our country and around the world.

But God sends that Angel to someone else and asks them to be the God Bearers for these children.

A recent call from God happened to a friend of mine at school. This single friend, Allen, has just adopted his second child—a 9-year-old boy, who has been in the child welfare system for most of those years. Three years ago, he adopted his first son, who is now 13, another children of God who had been languishing in the foster care system. We had an adoption shower to welcome my friend's new son, and, as Allen was thanking us for this gesture, he reminded us that we cannot imagine what his two sons have experienced before they were finally adopted—rescued, accepted loved, and given new life. I believe that an angel spoke to Allen, and Allen said, yes to God and yes to sharing his life with two special boys. This too, changes the world, and brings God's kingdom closer and closer. The whole of creation rejoices when we say yes to being God Bearers.

What can we do to bring God's kingdom on Earth? How can we sing of a world transformed as Mary did when she said Yes—Let it Be as you have said and sang of this wonderful upside-down world where God “has lifted up the lowly and filled the hungry with all good things.” I think by saying yes to God—we can do this everyday.

Maybe we are not called to adopt a child, as my friend, Allen is being called. But in addition to all of the other wonderful outreach projects we say yes to—there is one more to consider.

The Episcopal Church has launched an initiative with other compassionate organizations to help children and families in a real and permanent way, to lift up those who may be rich in spirit but are poor in resources—through the Nets for life project. A group of people at our 2009 Church Council said a big YES, to this project, became our angels, and were our angels, challenging us to say YES. To our baptismal vows--we have to live them out--We have to say YES-we have an end result—we can't just give lip service to doing good or following the Gospel's message to take care of the poor..

The initiative is very clear and specific, just like Mary's message was, and it is to buy and deliver enough mosquito nets to Africa to protect families and eradicate the malaria-carrying mosquito—malaria, a disease that kills one child every minute. We are the crossroads for this to happen—to be a part of a scientific achievement but more importantly a player in our salvation history to do the right thing. To be a life-changing, life-giving agent in the world. To say yes to God and be a part of bringing God's kingdom to earth. To say yes—this is not impossible—it is very possible and we will do it with God's help

Each net is \$12—our goal for the school and church is 700 nets—This goal, too, is possible with God's help. Checks written to Episcopal Relief and Development and dropped into the offering plates between now and Epiphany will make this goal possible. What a meaningful way to celebrate the birth of Jesus once again—to celebrate the 12 days of Christmas by giving \$12 for a life-giving net --one simple net that can save the lives of three children.

When we share food and clothing, and time at the Suthers Center, we are honoring our commitment to God, the church and one another. When we generously pledge, we are saying thank you to God for the love and care that our parish church offers to us. When we share with those neighbors close by, even if we don't know personally, and when we share with those who live halfway around the world, we are following the Gospel's call and we are hearing the angel's message to feed the hungry, to clothe the naked, to care for all God's children. Isaiah foretold it long ago—a prophet, a messenger from God—“We are anointed by the Lord to bring hope to the hopeless, freedom to the captives....”

Greetings Favored Ones—Place your own name in this passage this week and listen to what God is asking of you. We are truly blessed—favored by God—a favor that does not mean that he loves us more but that we are favored by the glorious job God has given us to do and the resources to share to get the job done!

WE all have that seed of the Divine planted deeply within us. This last week of Advent, may we each hear the Angel's message, continuing to say yes, letting the Holy Spirit move through us, planting that Divine seed, letting that seed grow to completion to be born on Christmas morn. And then become God Bearers with Mary.

Let our song this season be Mary's Magnificat and Let our prayer this Advent season be: Here am I Lord, let it be as you have asked.

Cast out our sin of saying No, inspire by your Holy Spirit to say YES, enter into our hearts—and Be Born in us today!

Amen