

December 18, 2011 / Fourth Sunday of Advent / David L. Edwards

Considering Mary

Matthew 1:26-38

*Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord;
let it be with me according to your word."*

As we approach the stories of Jesus' birth, I always feel it is important to remember something called "story truth". We get hung up, as those who consider ourselves modern, scientific type folks, with questions like, Did it really happen that way? Was Mary really a virgin? And so forth. Those are not questions that ancient people would have asked. They knew how to listen to spiritual stories so that they could hear the truth those stories conveyed. And the truth of stories is much richer and more beneficial than what we call "scientific" or "historical" truth. If we listen to these stories with open hearts and minds, we will find ourselves more enlightened by things like what it means to live by faith, or what this story is saying about the deepest nature and purpose of life. If we get stuck on things such stories were never meant to convey, then we will miss the vital truth they are intended to reveal. Children know how to listen to stories. So let us try to listen as children.

Mary is an about-to-be-married girl, probably no older than fifteen. In our view, she is soon to become an unwed pregnant teen. In God's view, she is part of a new thing God is doing. God works beyond the tidy little boundaries of society and its structures, and religion, too. Who would think of it? A pregnant teen from small town Palestine, serves as the catalyst for a whole new era in humanity's spiritual history. [I find myself thinking of John Cougar Mellencamp's song "Small Town", and that he could write a great new Christmas song out of this. You can't live in Indiana without getting drawn in to his music!] As Mary's song, which we call the Magnificat, says, she is of "low estate," and is experiencing the reality of God who does not work through the politically, socially, economically, or spiritually proud, powerful, or wealthy. God works through the meek, those whose hearts are simple and open, who claim no greatness of their own, but who

have willing spirits.

All we know of Mary is what this story reveals, hints of her spirit and character as she reacts to the news Gabriel brings. Six months earlier, the angel had a similar mission with regard to Mary's older cousin Elizabeth. Now he appears to Mary, telling her that God's favor is with her. I think that God's favor being with us means at least two things. First, God, the very Power that called forth and sustains the universe, takes special notice of us. That is a wonderful thought, isn't it? The writer of Psalm 8 put it this way: "When I consider the wide universe you have made, who are we that you should even notice us or care about us?" We human beings are not the center of the universe, a notion all too prevalent in the human psyche. Neither is the universe indifferent to our existence, as though we were anonymous specks of cosmic dust. We have our unique and rightful place within the universe, the creation. We belong. We are regarded with favor.

The favor of God also means that there is something God wants us to do, an impulse in each of us toward the serving of life. Mary, hardly out of childhood, has been chosen for something. It is not about Mary's being unique or some kind of saint, the way we usual think of saints as spiritual heroes. She could be anyone. She could be us. That's why the stories of God's call are so compelling and why they involve us, too. It has nothing to do with our having special qualifications or pedigrees or outstanding characteristics. Any of us, anytime, anywhere, at any stage of life, can become aware of God's favor, which includes God's call to serve life in some particular way. God's favor is with us as love that cares for and about us, and as call that fills our life with purpose. Right there is the framework for our spiritual lives as we work with them in this community. Through the inward journey, we deepen our awareness of and growth in God's love. Through the outward journey, we discern what it is God has called and gifted us to do for the sake of life around us.

Mary is "much perplexed" by Gabriel's words. The word used here has a richness of meaning. Mary might be suspicious and wary. She might be filled with awe. She might be overwhelmed and confused. She is certainly scared, for Gabriel tells her not to be afraid. Whatever mix of emotions she is experiencing, Mary's first spiritual "qualification," it seems, is that she is capable of awe and perplexity. She does not understand what is going on.

Throughout scripture we read stories of called servants of God who start out just this way. They are mostly run-of-the-mill folks who do not have a clue what is going on. They feel overwhelmed when they glimpse the sacred dimension of life. They feel inadequate. They fall on their faces. They cover their eyes. They don't know what to say. They feel afraid. Mary does not know why God has "found favor with her," and neither do we. God simply touches our lives in a particular way so that something good can happen for the world through us. This calls forth a whole different way of living--more questions than answers, more mystery than knowledge, more wonder than certainty, and more trusting than having to know exactly how things will happen. The call of God leads us to embrace uncertainty.

There is something so important here about what it means to be a person and a community of faith. Our scriptures are telling us that the most viable channels for God's activity are persons who are completely open, who have the capacity for awe and mystery, who do not see themselves as especially qualified or as experts, or even as "spiritual". This is also found in other major spiritual traditions. The Tao te Ching, written in China five centuries before Jesus, says, "Those who know don't talk, those who talk don't know." (56) In other words, those who glimpse the deep, sacred nature of reality are more inclined to humble and awed silence than to talking about it. Thomas Aquinas, the monumental theologian of the church, wrote a mountain of books about every aspect of Christian life and faith. Yet, he spent the final years of his life in silence. In the end, he saw that the truest knowledge of God is that God is unknowable. How about that!

Spiritual wisdom and knowledge show themselves not in how smart we are or how much we think we know, but in silence and not-knowing, in receptivity, being empty, not full. Being faithful Christians does not mean having firm convictions around which we lock our minds, or with which we beat others over the head. Being a person of faith does not mean having a rigid morality galvanized with shame, guilt, or judging others. It is easy, and dangerous, to reduce religion to a matter of beliefs and morals, then build a church around it where people can feel confident about their goodness and rightness, while condemning others who do not share the same outlook. This, by the way, goes for "liberals" and "progressives" as well as "conservatives". The biblical meaning of

faith, as in this story of Mary, is an openness to God that loosens our firm grip on our own strength or rightness or anything else. Faith consists of awed perplexity and wonder, combined with trustful living as those who are being led.

So, Gabriel tells Mary that she will become pregnant and bear a child to be named Jesus. He will be called Son of God and will establish God's reign completely and forever. I would like to put it this way: He will be the special Son of God who will show us all that we are children of God, and will help us to become what we really and truly are. Mary is again perplexed. How can this happen? I do not yet have that kind of relationship with a man. Gabriel responds that the Holy Spirit and the power of God will accomplish this. Even now, says Gabriel, your cousin Elizabeth has conceived a son, and she is an old woman. Nothing is impossible with God. Again, the insight that God works beyond the boundaries of what we think is possible or impossible.

What stands out for me at this point of the story is that God is up to something completely new and unexpected. We tend to call this a miracle. That is based on the premise that we know everything there is to know about how things work. The premise is wrong. We don't know everything about how things work. Our glimpse of life is very narrow, even with all of our knowledge. What we call a miracle is simply God working in ways that are beyond our limited vision. The point is God's power to bring new life, to create a new possibility. And this asks of us what Buddhists call a "don't know mind." It is not what we know, but our openness to what we don't know that creates room for God to work. That is why Jesus said that young children are closer to the kingdom than we adults are. It belongs to young children because they have a "don't know mind," a mind that is not yet crammed full of what we call knowledge and is open to wonder, the possible, the new. Mary is a child in this way. She has that childlike capacity for being open to and in awe of the sacred dimension of life.

God's desire to bring about something new needs our willingness, our openness. The story concludes with Mary's giving herself up to this thing that she does not understand and that probably still scares her. Her response is the same as those before her who have responded to God's call: "Here I am, the servant of the Lord!(1 Samuel 3; Isaiah 6:8)" Let it be with me according to your word. With this "let it be with me," Mary's life becomes a channel, an instrument of God's love for the world. "Let it be with

me” is the shift in our attitude, spirit, and awareness from a focus on control of ourselves and others and life around us, to instrumentality, being channels of something that wants to come into being through us. It is the point at which we lay down our painful and sad efforts to build a life, to construct an identity, to achieve success for ourselves, and we begin to open ourselves to God, to the power of life that wants to work through us for the sake of life.

Considering Mary in this story helps me to pay fresh attention to the kind of life we try to work with in our community. The life of practicing silence and inner listening; of being more aware of the sacred dimension of life and our own lives. The discerning of the particular ways God calls us to share with and live in God’s world. The life of knowing God’s favor--God’s special love for us and God’s call to us. The life of “let it be with me according to your word.” It is the life of knowing ourselves loved and belonging, and also called to some particular work or mission. It is being willing to move out in that direction, without having to have the answers, without knowing just how it will be possible. This, too, is a story of our journey inward and our journey outward.