

The Fourth Sunday of Advent - Year B  
December 21, 2008  
The Reverend Brett Backus, Deacon

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## “Preparing To Respond: Discipleship”

Luke 1:26-38

“Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.”

Today's Gospel is about discipleship. It is about hearing God's call and responding to it. Today's Gospel is about discerning and carrying out God's particular will in each of our individual lives.

I must confess that I really struggled with today 's Gospel. Now, some of you are probably laughing right now because struggling with the Gospel when it is my week to preach is definitely not an unusual thing for me, and almost anyone who works in our offices throughout the week can attest to that. Yet, there was something about today' s Gospel reading that just really caused me to struggle more than normal. For whatever reason, it seemed much more difficult for me to discern what message God wanted me to deliver today, but something good came out of this. See I have been teaching a bible study recently focused on learning to hear God's voice. To my amazement, this week I had to learn to really practice what I have been preaching in that when I felt God leading me to see today's Gospel in a new way, I had to trust God and respond faithfully even though it made me uncomfortable. Looking back, it really was an interesting experience for me because even though we are at the tail end of Advent and the sermons typically point us towards preparing ourselves for the coming Christ, as I meditated and prayed over the Gospel text this past week, all I could see was Mary.

Now, I should explain to you all that meditating on the Gospel and only being able to focus on Mary and her actions was a first for me, and to be honest, it was frustrating. Due to past experiences of witnessing Mary being placed above Jesus in importance and adoration, I tended to be very leery of the Virgin Mother and kept her at a safe distance in my own spiritual life. So you can imagine my frustration when all week the only thing I could think about was Mary. It seems to me that our God has a very ironic sense of humor. Ha, Ha, Ha. It seems that good always comes out of our listening to God 's call to break our own barriers. After a long time of praying over today 's Gospel lesson, I finally began to realize the way in which God actually used Mary, in her faithfulness, to break all kinds of the barriers of her day as well. You see, Mary was not only a Nazarene but of course, a woman too, and in her day women were treated as equal to nothing and it was said that nothing good could come out of Nazareth. So, in the typical style of God, all barriers were

broken and the world turned on its head when He brought the savior of the world out of Nazareth itself and through the faithful obedience of a Nazarene woman. If an apostle is one who brings the teachings of Christ to others, then Mary was the first Christian apostle in that she brought forth and literally gave birth to the Gospel itself, the Good News, Jesus Christ.

More importantly though, outside of the barriers broken through Mary, I realized this week that the story of Mary, her faithfulness and her actions, can be seen as a perfect example of Christian discipleship and that her example can be applied directly to our own personal and spiritual lives. What I am referring to here is Mary's response. After having the jarring and terrific experience of Gabriel showing up in her bedroom in the middle of the night and speaking of unfathomable acts, Mary, in complete faith and confidence responds as only a true disciple could: "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Mary's response to God's call and her brave acceptance of God's will for her is what today's Gospel is all about. Discipleship.

So, viewing the Gospel in this way, the question and challenge for all of us this morning becomes, do we respond to God's call in our own lives? Do we accept God's will for us? Perhaps, it is also important to back up a step and ask if we hear God's call at all. Obviously, God does not always make His will for us known so clearly as in Mary's case. But then again, Mary and Joseph both had their doubts even after the appearance of Gabriel. They wondered whether Gabriel's appearance was only a dream. We always find a way to doubt, don't we? God does speak to each of us in our own way. After the resurrection and ascension of Christ, the Holy Spirit was sent to dwell among us on earth. As Christians, we believe that through our Holy Baptism, just like the one we are about to participate in, we receive the Holy Spirit within us. It is through the Holy Spirit that God's will for our own lives is made known. It is through that gentle tugging or pushing, or in that quiet whisper, that God guides us Christians from within. Though I must admit that in my experience God's call often feels much more like a kick. Or maybe that's because it takes me a couple of times to actually hear Him.

In asking whether or not we hear that call or feel that guidance within us, I am reminded of the liturgical season we currently find ourselves in, Advent. Advent of course is supposed to be a time of reflection when we Christians are reminded to prepare ourselves for the coming of Christ into our world. It is supposed to be a quiet and meaningful time. In reality though, for most of us, it is not. Throughout the season of Advent we are so preoccupied with preparing for the celebration of what now sometimes seems to be secular Christmas traditions that there ends up being very little time devoted to the much needed spiritual preparation for Christmas. It makes me wonder if all that noise and business drowns out that quiet voice within us.

In a way, today's Gospel and Mary's actions call our attention to this unfortunate fact, and yet they also call us to see the preparation of Advent in a different light. You see, instead of trying to prepare ourselves for the celebration of the day December 25th, or the fact that on one day in ancient times God was brought into the world in human flesh, Advent can serve as a different reminder for us Christians. Advent and the actions of Mary in today's Gospel remind us to prepare and to always be prepared to recognize the constant presence of God in our own individual lives. This is the challenge that I invite us all this morning to carry with us throughout the rest of this Advent season, and really, every day of our lives. Be prepared for, or in other words, be open to God's voice in our lives.

You know, it makes me laugh to think that for about a month or two now I have been using a certain group bible study with several groups in this church, which teaches us to do this very thing. Its basic premise is that God is always calling us and guiding us from within and that all we have to do is to learn to be open and to listen to His will for our lives. My desire to teach that study paired with the message that I have received from today's Gospel is a what I see as a perfect example of God's quiet guidance in our lives. We just have to learn to listen. So today brothers and sisters in Christ, I commend such practices to you that focus our intentions on discerning God's call, and I urge all of us to be disciplined enough to cultivate an ear and more importantly desire for God's voice in our own lives. For if we cannot hear or feel it, then how will we ever respond? How will we ever be like Mary in today's Gospel? For the rest of this Advent and in our daily lives, I want to challenge us all to prepare ourselves to be open to God's presence and will for each of us. Let us teach ourselves to hear, and to learn to discern God's particular will in our lives. Our reason and motivation for doing this will be so that when we do finally hear the voice of God speaking to us, and every time that we hear or feel it, we too will be able to embody true discipleship and respond in the same powerful and beautiful way that Mary did.

“Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word. ”

*Amen.*