

“Servant of God” (2nd Sunday of Advent)

OT Reading: *Isaiah 7:10-14*; Gospel: *Luke 1:26-38*

December 8, 2019

PRAYER OF ILLUMINATION:

O Lord our God, inspire and enable us to be servants faithful in word and deed. You give us your Holy Word and your Spirit to reveal the truth of Jesus Christ. Give us eyes to see and ears to hear that we may embrace living the life your Son call us to in faith, humility and obedience. Amen.

INTRODUCTION:

Advent is a time of joy when we celebrate the steadfast faithfulness and love of God in the gift of his Son. Jesus is the ultimate Christmas gift providing forgiveness and salvation we do not deserve but God gives by his grace. Advent is a time to focus on the Christ-child and filter out the noise of society’s Christmas obsession with materialism. One of the best gifts we can give Jesus is our faithful service and commitment to do God’s work.

What does it mean to be chosen by God for a specific purpose? It is a calling and a blessing that often involves sacrifice and suffering. This is evident when we read the stories of the Prophets, and Mary the Mother of Jesus, and of Jesus, as Servants of God. In the Old Testament those chosen as Prophets are not highly learned and cultured men. There is nothing seemingly unique or special about them. They are men who work the land. But in God’s eyes they are special and although often reluctant, they obey his call. Each of them has doubts on their worthiness and ability to take on the heavy responsibility of their calling. God assures those he chooses that by the work of the Spirit and their faithful efforts, they will accomplish the mission he gives them. He looks deeply within all those he chooses, and simply says, “Follow Me.”

One case study on serving God is the experience of Moses and his reaction to God in the burning bush telling him he is chosen to tell Pharaoh “let my people go.” Moses brings up every excuse he can think of. Who am I to tell Pharaoh such a thing? I won’t know what to say. I have no idea what to do. Isn’t there anyone else ready to go? But, as we know, God does not let him off the hook.

For the rest of his life, Moses is painfully caught in the middle between a rebellious, unfaithful, disobedient, incorrigible people, and the Word and Will of Almighty God. Responding to God’s call doesn’t mean there won’t be hard times involved in following his way.

THE BODY:

Five hundred years before the birth of Christ, the Prophet Isaiah speaks a wonderful prophecy from God based on his covenant with the house of David. “The Lord himself shall give you a sign. Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call him Immanuel,” (Matt 1:23 NRSV), which means “God is with us.”

God reaches out through the Angel Gabriel to Mary, a young teenage girl who will fulfill his covenant plan for humanity. By the standards of her day, she would be perceived as a curious choice. Mary appears to be neither unique nor special. She is not of noble birth, nor educated, and she is of the common people who work the land. She has been raised to be a good wife, Mother and homemaker. Mary is about 16 years old, the customary age for a woman at that time to be married. She is recently engaged to Joseph, a man well regarded in the community. Like any engaged woman she and her parents are making plans for the wedding. Mary dreams of a new chapter in her life with her future husband, who is descended through the “House of David.” In the meantime, she will have limited contact with Joseph. There will be no dates, no intimate meetings, and she will remain a virgin until her wedding. These are her plans, her family’s expectations, the custom of society, and the Word of God. But she is special and unique in God’s eyes because he has a calling and plan for her life.

Gabriel suddenly appears to Mary and tells her she is singled out among all the women of the world for a special blessing and purpose. He greets her as “Highly favored one, blessed are you among women.” (NRSV, Luke 1:28). You can imagine her shock and fear.

To calm her, Gabriel assures Mary there is nothing to fear for “you have found favor with God.” (NRSV, Luke 1: 30). She is probably thinking: “What is he talking about? Who am I to be favored by God?” Gabriel adds to her confusion when he tells her if she accepts God’s call then she will become pregnant, and the implication is immediately. She will bear a son, and his name will be “Yeshua,” the “one who saves.” The Covenant of the Messiah will be enacted by the Holy Spirit and Mary, and fulfilled by her Son. Stunned, Mary does not doubt the Angel’s message, but realistically asks a question. “Uh, Gabriel, I’ve never had sex. How will this baby be conceived?” Gabriel reassures her nothing is impossible for the Holy Spirit.

If she agrees then Mary faces a sobering, painful reality. All her hopes and plans of a happy marriage and future are at risk. By becoming pregnant without marriage, she may be condemned by her Father and Joseph. If she is accused and her guilt determined by the local Synagogue, then Jewish law proscribes death by stoning. If she escapes punishment Joseph may still reject her and she will face the social stigma of being shunned for the rest of her life. With this bleak future weighing heavily and briefly in her mind she could have answered with all the excuses previously made by others to God when he extended their call. I am unworthy – I won’t know what to do – choose someone else - why me? Mary responds with a deep and abiding faith in God’s will for her life and the life of her first-born son. “**Here I Am, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.**” (NRSV, Luke 1: 38).

I think the reason God chooses Mary is because he discerns what is in her heart and mind. God knows she will not let any of her fears or wants for the present or the future get in the way of her duty to him. He chooses her because of her strength of character, courage and faithfulness. Mary responds to God’s call because she trusts he will care for her. Her faith gives her the moral courage to confront her family, Joseph and the community with a decision and a truth that may be condemned.

Mary’s character is revealed in Luke Chapter 1, and the character of Joseph in Matthew 1: 18-20. In the Four Gospels he doesn’t get anywhere near as much emphasis as Mary. But his integrity, goodness and faith shine through. Joseph is looking forward to his marriage to Mary. She is a young woman of faith, integrity, and high morals. When Mary tells him she is pregnant by the will of God through the Holy Spirit, Joseph is deeply troubled. Joseph decides not to publicly condemn her and takes the only step he knows to protect her from judgment and public censure. He will end their engagement. Before he can act, Gabriel appears and reassures him of God’s purpose for Mary and him. They are to marry. Joseph is chosen among all men in the world to serve God by being responsible for raising Jesus as his earthly Father.

Neither Joseph nor Mary understands the sacrifice Jesus makes by giving up all honor, glory and majesty at the side of God in heaven to be born in humility among the lowest in society. Joseph will not live to see Jesus begin his ministry and become the ultimate Servant of God. In his ministry Jesus faithfully witnesses to the grace, love and truth of God sacrificing himself for our redemption and salvation. To serve God and you and me, he willingly pays price of being attacked, ridiculed, humiliated, scorned, and put to death. Jesus sacrifices everything for us. What will we sacrifice to serve him?

Mary also pays a high price for her decision to be the Mother of the Son of God. She raises her beloved Son and must watch as he experiences a ministry being threatened and attacked for the truth he lives and teaches. Mary is helpless as her Son is arrested and mercilessly tortured by the Romans. She watches her Son die the worst death the Romans could devise slowly suffocating in agony. Mary stands powerless at the foot of the cross feeling as if a sword is piercing her heart.

ILLUSTRATION:

Sacrifice and suffering for Christ has been part of the Christian life since his ascension. In every generation many have been challenged to stand up for Christ. It is 1934, and Adolph Hitler summons German Church leaders to chastise them for not enthusiastically supporting Nazism and his election as Chancellor. After Hitler's angry tirade, Pastor Martin Neimoller speaks about his concern for the welfare of the Church and German people. Hitler snaps back, "You concern yourself to the Church. I'll take care of the German people." Pastor Neimoller bravely replies, "You said that you will take care of the German people. But we too, as Christians and Churchmen, have a responsibility toward the German people. That responsibility was entrusted to us by God, and neither you nor anyone else in this world has the power to take it from us." Hitler listens in silence but he is not used to this kind of moral courage. Later that night Pastor Neimoller's Church is bombed. He is arrested and is terrified on the morning of his trial as his guard escorts him to the courtroom. As they ascend a flight of stairs he hears a whisper from the guard. It is the words of Proverbs 18:10 (NIV), "The name of the Lord is a strong tower; the righteous run to it and are safe." Pastor Neimoller's fear falls away and the power of God's Word sustains him in his calling, trial, and years in a concentration camp. (1)

CLOSING:

We too will face moments of truth when God confronts us to live our faith in ways challenging, uncomfortable, and unpopular. Our courage and faith will be put to the test. How will we respond? Will we bob and weave, dodge and run when the Holy Spirit offers us the opportunity to serve in ways requiring sacrifice? Or, will we, like Mary, serve God with peace, humility, and quiet joy. Will you and I also respond to his call by replying, "**Here I Am Lord, Your Servant?**"

While we neither worship nor pray to Mary, we honor her as the Mother of the Son of God. We lift up Mary for her virtue and sacrificial faith and service to God. She provides each of us with a powerful testimony and example of what it means to be a true Servant of God. Amen.

(1) Robert J. Morgan, Preacher's Sourcebook of Creative Sermon Illustrations: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2007. Pages 152-153.