**Holy Disruption**

The Rev. David Griswold, Deacon Advent 4 December 24, 2023 Luke 1: 26-38; 2 Samuel 7: 1-11, 16

“Where are you?”

We heard those words from God as this Advent season began a few weeks ago in our glorious Lessons and Carols service. “Where are you?” These are God’s first words to newly created humans in the garden. Not a remote or aloof creator, God calls out, seeking connection.

Advent invites us to anticipate the truth of Emmanuel—*God with us*—and discover or rediscover God at work in our lives. It seems natural to frame the question from our side: “God, where are you? In the midst of all that makes us anxious, fearful and dispirited, God, where are you as our guide and companion? At a moment when the warring ways of the world have made it too dangerous to celebrate Christmas in Bethlehem, God, where are you? How can we find you?”

Yet Advent reminds us that the story of our life in God is also about God’s long, loving, patient search for a way to dwell with us. Time and again God has sought us out, seeking relationship with people formed in divine love, calling us to help spread shalom—God’s peace that fosters social harmony grounded in justice and interdependence.

Across centuries, working through holy leaders, prophets and monarchs, God tries to form a lasting bond with God’s people. But like us, our ancestors struggle to honor God’s call. Today’s first reading offers the image of a mobile God, moving among the people “in a tent and a tabernacle” while King David seeks to build God a sturdy “house of cedar” (2 Sam 7: 6-7). Yet God seems to be saying to the king: I’m looking not for a building to live in, but for an enduring relationship with a faithful people.

As it turns out, no human monarch can be relied on to channel God’s love and justice. We can imagine God’s mounting frustration about being in a long-distance relationship with the faithful while earthly leaders seem unable to nurture our bond with God and one another.

God’s unwavering determination to move closer to us culminates this morning as Advent is about to morph into Christmas Eve. Our pageant will start in less than two hours. The story it tells begins with the world-changing shift in God’s approach that is captured here in Luke’s gospel. The energy of two waves of yearning come together—one, beleaguered humanity’s deep need for a loving, liberating God, and the other, our compassionate God’s deep desire to dwell among and within us.

These forces meet in what is surely the most famous interview in the New Testament. For many Christians, Mary’s visit with the angel is so familiar, so deeply woven into our memories, that it can seem far distant from our experience. Yet in addition to revealing God’s incredible plan to take on humanness, and Mary’s indispensable role in making it happen, what does this “Annunciation” announce to twenty-first century disciples?

One perhaps obvious reminder it offers is that none of us is exempt from the invitation to bear God into the world. Our capacity to help advance the purposes of God does not depend on specialized credentials or a preferred starting place. Mary lives in an obscure village, comes from a family without social pedigree and is, as a teenage girl in her society, seemingly powerless.

But she has one attribute that is essential to God: she is open to the power of mystery to shape her life experience. A holy figure appears and addresses Mary in a way she’s never heard before: “Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you” (Luke 1: 28). Even before Gabriel relates God’s momentous message, Mary is uneasy—we’re told she is “perplexed” or fearfully confused. Yet she keeps listening.

Given Mary’s virginity and what she knows about the norms of her culture, she could be expected to reject what Gabriel tells her next. Faced with such a wildly dubious, terrifying and potentially ruinous plan, we might expect Mary to run in the other direction. I expect that for some of us, any plan that so utterly defies logic and challenges our comfort zone would be a non-starter.

Yet when Gabriel shares with Mary the report that her kinswoman Elizabeth—thought to be barren--is now expecting a child, Mary allows the mystery to lead her where it will, saying “here am I…let it be with me according to your word” (1: 38). She offers an answer to the question posed by God in the garden, still echoing from ages ago. She doesn’t say “OK, this plan makes sense, Gabriel, tell God I’m all in.” But her fear and discomfort are outweighed by her love for God and her readiness to trust this message about her place in God’s plan.

While cautious, Mary does more than passively assent. She becomes, as one writer describes it, “a willing partner in the holy disruption that befalls her.” \*

Whether or not we can relate to Mary’s experience, it is a gift to observe the way in which she responds. The story announces to us that we too can come to recognize and reveal Emmanuel. Like Mary, we can take notice of something holy in the midst of the mundane. We can be skeptical, even doubtful, but not quite dismissive. We can keep listening, looking for a promising signal that what might seem improbable need not be impossible. And we can decide to just go with the mystery and say yes, God, let’s see where this will lead.

Doesn’t our presence here today indicate that the doors of our lives are open, at least a crack, to some “holy disruption” and mystery? Among all the choices our culture offers for how to spend our time, we’ve chosen this community as one that helps to make our lives meaningful. We look for wisdom and meaning beyond what can be known intellectually or explained by facts.

I know from being among you that holy disruption has many perhaps cautious yet willing partners, making its mark on us as individuals and as a community. I know from the stories you’ve shared that a holy messenger can appear out of nowhere and lead us to new choices about our relationships or vocation.

A gesture of encouragement can come during a time of loss or despair, altering our outlook and restoring hope. An opportunity can arise to advocate for justice or help to empower those who are vulnerable. A skill or gift that lies dormant within us can take on renewed vitality as we apply it in an unexpected way.

Holy disruption can make us uncomfortable, such as by calling us to acknowledge harm we’ve inflicted knowingly or by our indifference. Recognizing Emmanuel entails owning that discomfort and discovering how to be agents of healing and change.

At the end of today’s gospel we hear that the angel goes away. Given the discombobulating nature of Gabriel’s visit, perhaps Mary is relieved at his departure. She goes on to express joy and resolve in her new calling. For the rest of us, however, it might take longer to go from tentative acceptance to the full embrace of what God is inviting us into. We might need the angel to reappear to offer continued inspiration and support when the path seems uncertain and we’re tempted to turn back.

Today’s story announces that the truth of Emmanuel, *God with us*, comes alive not only because there are “Marys” in the world but also because there are “Gabriels.” God wants us to pay attention to the people who are with us on the faith path, to offer support, encouragement and at times challenging messages even when they may not realize they need it.

We might not use words as lofty as “Greetings, favored one, the Lord is with you.” But we can remind one another that we belong to God and have a precious part to play in God’s next adventure among us.

Amen.

\*Author cited: Kimberly Bracken Long, in *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Vol. 4*, Westminster John Knox Press, 2008; p. 97