

NEW TESTAMENT READING: Luke 1:26-38

26 In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, 27 to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. 28 And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." 29 But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. 30 The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. 31 And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. 32 He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. 33 He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." 34 Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" 35 The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. 36 And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. 37 For nothing will be impossible with God." 38 Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her.

“Here I Am”

Will begin today with one of my favorite stories: Years ago, Rev. John Buchanan, remembers having sat down with his son to undertake a project of assembling a cardboard cutout creche: a stable, manger, baby Jesus, Mary and Joseph, sheep, cows, shepherds, and the wise men—“fold on dotted line, place tab A in slot B.” John was attempting to teach his boy the real meaning of Christmas. It was his attempt to counter all the commercial hullabaloo that kids are subjected to at Christmas. After hours of effort, his 4 year-old determined, however, that it had been a disaster; nothing worked the way it was supposed to. The kitchen table was littered with torn, bent, useless figures. *“Without Scotch tape,”* John says, *“it wouldn’t have been salvageable.”* Surveying the disaster, his boy, who had just been told that Christmas is when *“God came to be with us,”* said, *“So Daddy, where is God in this mess?”*

Even then, John recognized his son’s innocent question to actually be the quintessential Christmas question. We all ask it at some point, but maybe it’s most poignant for us at Christmas time. In fact, somewhere, this past week, I asked it as I witnessed leaders at various levels of our country and our world once again get caught up in infighting and favoring their politics over the lives of people, real people, often the weak and the suffering, the voiceless, the persecuted. It makes me despair. And I know you too. And I’m sure the question “Where is God in this mess?” was posed by others too this week ...by students who found a D on the report card, by workers who received a pink slip, by victims of the storms, by family members huddled in ERs, by persons alone due to family disputes, by police responding to yet another drug overdose, by people dreading their first Christmas without their loved ones. *“Where, is God in this mess, in all of this disruption, sinfulness, and tragedy?”*

It was a question that may rightly have been asked some 2000+ years ago when the Hebrew couple, Mary and Joseph, found themselves responding to an edict for a census, traveling in the cold of winter from Nazareth to Bethlehem. Mary was probably no more than 13-15yrs old and 9 months pregnant when she walked or rode the nearly 100 miles of rocky terrain and desert. There was threat of delivering the baby at any point, not to mention being attacked by robbers or wild beasts. Of course, the messiness of also finding no place reasonable to stay was very

real, having to give birth in the dark and dank stable, with the filth and smell of animals all-around. And undergirding all of this was the fragile political and ultimately very violent environment in which they lived. Messy!

It was a question that might rightly have been also asked 9 months earlier when the Angel Gabriel appeared to Mary, when she was only recently engaged, and told her she would bear a child. Frederick Buechner imagines that *“Mary struck him as hardly old enough to have a child, let alone this child.”* *“The angel 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, knowing she certainly was. But as he said it,”* Buechner imagines, *“the angel 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 teenage girl.¹* But yet, Mary’s humble answer: *“Here I am, the servant of the Lord: let it be to me according to your word.”*

It’s easy to overlook the magnitude of Mary’s reply. WE need stop to take note that even though she was certainly very aware of the messiness of her place and time...and even though she could imagine how this news was going to change/threaten her life, she, nevertheless, said, “Here I am”! She was brave and faithful and I think also very attentive. She’d been watching enough to recognize that God was already in the mess. God, she knew, had invested intimately in her people for long generations through their ups and downs. Only a few verses later, she sang a song, known as the Magnificat, that her foremother, Hannah, had sung centuries before when the people had fled Egypt’s captivity. In it, Mary testified to the God who had shown mercy for those who fear God; who had scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts, who brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly, who filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty, and who had long remembered Abraham and all of his descendants. She sang, *“My soul magnifies the Lord,” she said, “and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant....”*. Mary knew

¹ F. Buechner. *“Peculiar Treasures”*. (New York: Harper Collins; 1979), 44.

that God had previously chosen ordinary people for divine work, people like David, Moses, Rahab, Ruth, Elizabeth, and was now “laying it all down” for her, for the girl in the man’s world, for outcast, the overlooked, those disenfranchised and dismissed....God was laying it all down for the human race. She was being included in God’s divine plan and it required her “all in” promise. She gave it, obediently, perfectly, humbly, terrified--certainly, but she gave it.

The Christian claim, of course, is this very thing, that the holy, omnipotent, Creator of the Universe chose not to assume a position somewhere detached and removed from humanity, but to take on our limitations, to become flesh and blood and enter human history as one of us. God took up residence right in the middle of humanity’s mess, to share our lot and our vulnerability. And through the contagious influence of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection, God is bringing a time with no more tears or pain, or sorrow or death, no more mess. This God has done this by being born as vulnerable, touchable baby, born of a scared, ordinary and faithful teenager. Sort of astounding, isn’t it?

Now....Mary’s response has for centuries served as a model for our response. This means that we must be attentive, watching and be expecting God to show up. And it means that despite our inclinations to shut ourselves off or the deny God’s unlimited power, we must trust that God can do amazing things through ordinary people like us, even turn a warring world to peace, make a divided society one, offer embrace and affirmation and welcome to those who are excluded, discriminated-against, marginalized.² No, when God breaks into our world, into our lives, when God taps us on the shoulder, our response needs to be Mary’s, “Here I am, the servant of the Lord.”

Journalist Steve Hartman reports the most wonderful examples of ordinary people doing things which have big impact in his “*On the Road with Steve Hartman*” series. Recently he told a story of a young woman named Katie Steller, who, as a child in a big family, never received haircuts except from her mother, who was not an excellent hair cutter admittedly. However, Katie became very sick with an autoimmune disease when she was 11, and it took a toll on her

² Karoline Lewis, “Mary’s Response.” <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post-5024> (accessed 12/20/17).

body including her hair, which she began to lose. Her mother wanted to make her feel better so she promised to take Katie to a real stylist who could give her a professional haircut. Katie remembers it being a life-changing experience, *“I sat in a real stylist chair and the beautician talked to me as a person not an illness, asking me what I wanted and touching me in a non-medical setting. She made me feel so safe and good about myself. It ignited a fire in me.”* And indeed, Katie became a hairstylist and not only a hairstylist but a hair stylist with a mission to make others feel like she did. *“What is the red chair project?”*, Steve asked. *“Well, the red chair project came about because as I was preparing to open my first salon, I initially had much of the equipment like the red stylist chairs at my home. And I thought to myself, “Why don’t I do something with them? So, I decided to load the chairs in my car and take them to some of the people I see every day, ones who are homeless and need haircuts so badly, people who are struggling and couldn’t otherwise afford anything nice for themselves.”* So she did, She drive to the down and out and then gave them a haircut if they wanted one. *“What does it mean when someone cares enough like Katie to lay their hands on you,”* Steve Hartman asked one homeless man who was getting a haircut from her. *“Well, when you don’t have anyone else and you’ve been homeless for as long as I have, this human contact, knowing someone cares enough to get so close, well, it means a lot.”* And the red chair project has caught on. Other stylists from other salons are doing their version of it too, all around the city. On any given day, you can see this same thing happening in the streets of Minneapolis now. *“I’m glad for it,”* Katie responded. *“It’s just the way I’m using my life to pay forward what was done for me.”* In summary, Steve said, *“It shows us all how a single act of kindness can grow great dividends, locks and locks of dividends.”*³

Friends, I will leave you with two questions on this holy day. “What is God calling you to do, right now, in our time and place, in our mess, and what will be your response? What will be your response to the mighty One, God our Savior, who has looked with favor upon you....who came so long ago, wholly in the baby of Bethlehem, to be with us and for us forever? *“Here I*

³ Steve Hartman. “Kindness Goes Viral” CBS. *On the Road with Steve Hartman*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WL54nQy6NYA>. (accessed 12.

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am”, Mary said. And Mary gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth and laid him in a manger. Amen.