

Psalm 126

When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream. Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy; then it was said among the nations, “The Lord has done great things for them.” The Lord has done great things for us, and we rejoiced. Restore our fortunes, O Lord, like the watercourses in the Negeb. May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy. Those who go out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, carrying their sheaves.

Luke 1:26-38

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, “Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.” But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. 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. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.” Mary said to the angel, “How can this be, since I am a virgin?” 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. 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. For nothing will be impossible with God.” 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.

Sermon

It is the beloved story of Mary and the angel Gabriel. That peaceful image of Mary learning about God's plan for her life, her special calling to be the mother of the Son of God. Often depicted as a holy, sacred moment in word, song and painting - I wonder what the moment would have really felt like. Did Gabriel appear in Mary's room or simply knock on the door and walk in? What signs of terror and fright did Mary display that prompted Gabriel to say, "Fear Not?" Was the whole conversation done in a matter of minutes, or did this take a good hour or two to get from greetings to agreement? The narrative is filled with questions and moments of wonder, but the part of the story that drew my attention this week is the pregnant pause of the angel that left Mary perplexed and pondering his words.

A pregnant pause often occurs when the story teller builds up the anticipation of the audience and then, for dramatic effect and increased anticipation, takes a brief silent break before revealing the end of the story. Comedians use this technique quiet frequently as they allow the audience to build their anticipation of the sarcastic or humorous conclusion of their joke.

And here, the angel sets up Mary in a very similar way. "Greeting favored one" wait what did you say? "The Lord is with you" with me, wait what does that mean, you are simply buttering me up to then land the joke. What will it be? Something about the inferiority of women or young people? Something about being poor or betrothed? Oh, I know, the joke is about the audacity of marriage in the midst of an occupied nation, how silly it is to find love in the midst of despair and hopelessness. Foolishness. What's the joke Gabriel, what is the punch line?

"Greetings favored one, you are going to be pregnant before marriage... but don't worry, it will be the son of the Most High." And there it was, the sarcasm of being the favored one, of being so loved by God to be given this great honor - oh, don't worry about how the world will look upon you with disdain, your betrothed will see only dishonor - no, you are the favored one. Mary was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be.

Mary didn't jump to any conclusions, she didn't immediately dismiss Gabriel out of hand or laugh at the craziness of his story. Mary didn't immediately say no, or run and hid in a cave or go off in the opposite direction. No, Mary stayed in that moment, in the anticipation and the questions. Mary continued to ponder and to question and to wonder. And maybe most importantly, Mary continued to discern God's will and hope for her life.

And what was her conclusion? It was that the joke was not on her. Instead the joke was on the world, on all those who thought that the promised one would come in power, and not to the plain. All of those who equated majesty and might to the conquering power, to Rome, and not to the occupied losers, not to Israel. And the joke was on those who believed the messiah should be born to the priestly class and not to a no name peasant.

The joke is that God turns all these expectations upside down and in doing so, turns the sinful and broken order of the world on its heads as well. The Son of the Most High is born to the lowliest of women. The Son of God is also the son of a peasant. And in the midst of the paradox we find that love comes down not from the top, but bubbling up from the bottom. Love is not a gift from the elite, but is a grassroots movement within the everyday, common people. Love wells up in the middle of nowhere, like a desert spring in the wilderness that cools and feeds the land and animals. Love comes to us in the unexpected places of our life. Sometimes it comes from those we believe have the least ability to have it. Sometimes it comes from those we have written off as lost or no longer important. Sometimes love comes in the midst of the despair and feelings of hopelessness.

And we, we simple need to slow down. We need to take a breath, still our bodies and minds, and reflect on the significance of God's favor, of God with us, of love that comes to a young, simple, peasant woman. For all the travel and gatherings, for all the carols and presents, for all the shopping and eating - it is love that is the center of this holiday, love that comes down, that takes on human form, that cries in the darkness and anticipates a light that shines past death, that rolls away stones, that opens blind eyes, that mobilizes the lame, and calls men and women to a new way of life, of love. This week may we find a moment to live in the pregnant pause, anticipate the joy and love that God's story continues to give to you and to I.