

The Sunnybrook Pulpit

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From Gung-Ho to Godbearer¹

A shoot shall sprout from the stump of King David's father Jesse
and a branch shall grow out of his roots.- Isaiah 11:1-10

The Holy Spirit will come upon you, the power of the Highest hover over you;
Therefore, the child you bring to birth will be called Holy, Son of God. – Luke 1:26-38

When I was twenty or so, I had just returned from traveling for six months and I was looking for a job. For some reason, somebody thought that I might do OK as a lay minister, so I got offered a job filling in for a church that was between ministers. Now I didn't know the first thing about being a minister other than watching what ministers did. I had never prepared a sermon, led a prayer, or any of that. But the thing that scared me the most was the possibility I might have to do a funeral. My other option was to spend another summer lifeguarding, which is almost as exciting as watching paint dry, so I was kind of intrigued.

So I went and talked to the minister at my parents' church, Rev. Colclough. And I asked him what you say to people who are in grief. Wise people seem to always answer questions with stories, and when I asked Rev. Colclough this question, he told me a story that I have never forgotten. When he was starting out," he said, a boy in his congregation was killed in a car accident. He knew the boy and his family well, and he was just overwhelmed with how sad it was that this happy, lively young man was no longer. When he went to visit them, he managed to stammer how sorry he was, but for most of the time he was there, he was so sad that he just sat in a corner of their living room, tears streaming down his face. While he was there, many other people came and went, expressing their sorrow and sadness in what seemed to him like an eloquent way. One of their visitors was another minister, from another denomination, who assured them that God, in his inscrutable love, must have had a reason for taking their son. By the time he left, he felt totally inadequate and felt like he was in the wrong profession.

A couple of weeks later, after the funeral, the mother of the dead boy phoned him up to thank him. Of all the people who had visited that day, she said, his visit had been the most comforting to her. 'How could that be?' he asked. He had blubbered

¹ The title of this sermon is taken directly from the wonderful book on youth ministry: Kendra Creasy Deane & Ron Foster, *The Godbearing Life: The Art of Soul Tending for Youth Ministry* (Upper Room Books, 1998), chapter 2.

like an idiot the whole time he was there! She responded by saying ‘Of all the people who visited that day, you were the only one who seemed to be feeling what I was feeling, that this was horrible, tragic. You were the only one who I felt was really there. All the others had a lot to say, but you were the only one who really listened to what I had to say.’

That was the story he told me. It must have been reassuring, because I took the job as a lay minister. A couple of months later, I thought of that story as I sat outside the home of a teenager who had just driven his quad into the side of a pickup truck at a rural intersection. It was my first funeral. I don’t remember anything I said. I don’t remember the funeral at all. What I do remember is sitting outside the house before meeting them for the first time, scared spitless, knowing that this family needed more than I was capable of giving them, knowing that they needed nothing less than God, but also remembering that story, realizing that that wise older minister had given me permission to listen and care, without feeling like I had to try to fix it or make it all right. He had given me permission to simply *be*, and to let God work through me.

It is tempting in ministry, and in life, to be gung-ho, to be constantly busy, always doing something, always saying something, always trying to fix something or someone. The danger is that we are so busy trying to make it all right that we fail to realize that we are not all right ourselves, so any fixing we try to do, will just make things worse. This season of Advent is a time of preparation and pregnancy, not performance and production. The word Advent simply means “coming” and so in this season we remember that one of the most essential abilities in the spiritual life is the ability to take a step back, take ourselves out of the centre, and allow God to act.

Mary is the first disciple, and when we read these stories, we can imagine ourselves in her shoes. What the angel says to her, it also says to us. The angel’s message is one of affirmation and invitation. The first thing that the angel says to Mary and to us is a word of affirmation. “Greetings, favoured one. The Lord is with you!” The first thing that God wants Mary to hear, that God wants us to hear, is that she is favoured, just as she is, before she accomplishes anything or performs anything. She is a teenager, barely out of diapers, and God favours her. She does not need to find herself, because God has known her from the beginning and loved her. Eugene Peterson paraphrases the angel’s greeting in this way:

Good morning! You're beautiful with God's beauty,
Beautiful inside and out! God be with you.²

Many of us spend so much of our lives trying to establish an identity on something, anything other than God's favour. We look for success in worldly terms, through the accumulation of wealth or prestige. And then we grow old, and feel useless, and find that when all is said and done, we are back where we started, as babies, helpless and dependent, and yet still loved, still favoured. The first word of God, to Mary and to us, is the word of affirmation: "Greetings, favoured one!"

And because God favours her, because God loves her, "God has a plan for her. It is an astonishing plan... God has just asked a *teenager* to bring *salvation* into the world!"³

When the angel Gabriel visited Mary, he must have wondered what God was thinking. The saviour of the world entrusted to a teenager? Frederick Buechner imagines the scene this way:

She struck the angel Gabriel as hardly old enough to have a child at all, let alone this child, but he'd been entrusted with a message to give her, and he gave it.

He 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," [the angel] said.

As he said it, he only 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 [teenager].⁴

The church doesn't ask much of teenagers – ninety minutes on a Friday night, perhaps. "Come on," we plead with them on Sunday morning, "it's only an hour." But God has no hesitation about making the most incredible demands on this young woman. She is to become pregnant with the son of God, to bear in her own body, for nine months, the divine presence. She is to become, as the Eastern church refers to her, a Godbearer. And she doesn't feel prepared, any more than any of us. "How can this be," she asks, "since I am innocent, a virgin?"

² Peterson, *The Message*.

³ Kendra Creasy Deane & Ron Foster, *The Godbearing Life*, p. 46

⁴ quoted in Deane & Foster, *The Godbearing Life*, pp. 46-7

There are no dress rehearsals for parenting, or for life. We're thrown into it blind, and we make it up as we go along. None of us are ready for life when it comes. We simply have to live, and do the best we can. We are all innocent, every one of us, and utterly unprepared for God's call when it comes.

But God still calls, innocent and unprepared as we are, God still calls. Like Mary, "God invites all of us to become Godbearers – persons who by the power of the Holy Spirit smuggle Jesus into the world through our own lives..." [p. 49] That's scary. We're used to positions with job descriptions and limited hours. The invitation to bear God, to smuggle Jesus into the world is an amazing, terrifying invitation.

And so to us as well the promise is made "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you... For nothing is impossible with God." To us as well as to Mary, that promise is made, that the Holy Spirit will make possible what seems to be impossible.

Mary must respond to this impossible invitation, and so must we. Her answer is "let it be with me according to your word," not that different from her son's "thy will be done." Each week, when we pray the Lord's Prayer, when we put a little piece of ourselves on that offering plate, we are echoing Mary's answer, offering not just our money, not just our activity, not just what we do, but ourselves, to the creator. We say "yes" to the one who first said "yes" to us.

The Advent season is for many of us a time of gung-ho, frantic activity. But it is also a time for stillness and waiting. As we watch with Mary, and await the birth of her child, it is a time to ponder the seeds of divine love which are growing within us, and to await their birth with joy.

To us this day, an angel has come, bringing affirmation and invitation. You are favoured by God, you are invited to carry God. Say yes, I beg you, carry the love that you are offered here and share it with others, in whatever way seems good to you, for in so doing you will really be celebrating the birth of love in your lives.

Let us offer ourselves to God in song, as we sing "O Ancient Love, within our hearts be born."