

Meadowbrook Congregational Church

“Thinking Small”

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Reverend Art Ritter

Luke 1: 26-38

26 In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, ²⁷to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸And he came to her and said, 'Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.' ²⁹But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. ³⁰The angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. ³¹And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. ³²He 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. ³³He will reign over the house of Jacob for ever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.' ³⁴Mary said to the angel, 'How can this be, since I am a virgin?' ³⁵The 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. ³⁶And 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. ³⁷For nothing will be impossible with God.' ³⁸Then 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.

Last week, we had a furnace blower motor burn out and I suddenly found myself in conversation with a heating and cooling technician. It was a most difficult thing for me to do. My nickname is surely not "Mr. Fix-It." Most of these people speak in a language I know nothing about- bearings and capacitors and thermocouples! I get the same feeling when I try to purchase a computer or when I take my car in for service. Those with whom I am speaking suddenly have all the power. They stand above me because they possess the knowledge and speak the language. Oh how I long for a conversation that includes earned run averages and on base percentages, you know- something on my level of understanding.

I used to make frequent trip trips to Primary Children's Hospital in Salt Lake City. A most informative sign was posted near each stairway and elevator. Perhaps the same is true of the Children's Hospital at the Detroit Medical Center. The sign has some advice for adults who visit the children there. The advice is to sit down when speaking with a child. Sit down so that you do not tower above them. Move yourself down to their level so that they will feel more comfortable. It is a wonderful reminder for all of us. Stay on the same level of those you are trying to reach.

I have shared with some of you the story of when I was serving as a chaplain at Harper Hospital in Detroit, Michigan. I was on overnight call and was paged to a nurses' station around 2:00 a.m., because a patient had died and his family was on their way to

the hospital. They had been told simply that there was a change in their father's condition and that they needed to come quickly. Upon their arrival, it was hospital policy that a doctor would inform them about the death of their loved one. I sat in the waiting room for around thirty minutes, sitting with the uneasy family. Finally the doctor entered. He stood in front of them and rather routinely blurted out, "I have to inform you that your father has expired. I am terribly sorry." And with that he quickly left the room. The family members stared at each other with puzzled looks. They had no idea what the doctor had just said. They had no idea what he was talking about. For all they knew, he was speaking about a parking meter or the cottage cheese in the back of the refrigerator. Realizing their bewilderment, I quickly translated. "Your father has died. He's gone. He died in his sleep about 30 minutes ago. I am so sorry."

On the fourth Sunday of Advent our focus turns to one of the principal characters of the season, Mary, the mother of Jesus. Luke describes Mary as the way in which God comes to us. The story is a beautiful one, full of mystery and sentiment. Yet it is also full of important truth for all of us as we prepare for the gift of Christmas.

The angel of the Lord interrupts what is an otherwise run of the mill life of an ordinary young peasant girl in a mundane time and place. The visit of this angel was not expected nor was it particularly welcome. Mary was greatly troubled by the words concerning her future. The angel tells her that she will give birth to the child who will be the Son of God, one whose kingdom will last forever. "How can this be?" she asks the angel. Why me? Why now? Like many throughout history, Mary wonders why God's purpose might be fulfilled in her rather than in someone more worthy and more important.

Mary knows her limitations. She knows what she can do and what she cannot do. The angel helps her realize that she has been chosen not because of her qualifications or even expectations but because that is simply the way God works. God chooses the small and the vulnerable, the ordinary and the weak. This is the power of God at work in this miracle about which preacher Peter Gomes writes, "makes out of nothing, something; takes nowhere and makes it somewhere; and takes nobody and makes him/her somebody."

We live in a world where we expect the story to be written in another way. How is it that people generally get their way in our world? Through power and influence. Through knowing the movers and shakers. Through wads of cash or secret knowledge. Through the point of a gun, armies and bombs and the fear created by acts of terror. It is extremely fitting that in describing the Christmas event, the author of Luke clearly mentions the powers of the world in that day, people whose power was gained and held in those standard human ways. Caesar Augustus. Quirinius, governor of Syria. Herod the Great of Judea. These were the men of authority. These were the people who commanded the world's attention because they had played the power game according to the rules of the world and won.

And how is it that we believe we can achieve everyday greatness? Winning. Climbing the ladder. Most of our time is spent competing with somebody, trying to prove our worth in our work, our classrooms, our communities and our families. If we only try hard enough we earn someone's approval. If we only work hard enough, we'll make the grade. If we only appear good enough, we'll deserve God's favor.

Yet God chose not to work in this way. God did not demand our obedience through a ruthless power play. God did not offer us salvation only when we worked our way up to it. God was determined to reveal love in the most unexpected of ways. God became small. God became like us. God showed us what it means to be human so we can stop trying so hard to be God and simply be who we were created to be. God became a living, breathing, visible bundle of love and grace wrapped in the arms of a young woman who believed. And it was Mary, innocent and wide-eyed, courageous and faithful, Mary- who trusted in God enough to allow God's presence to come in this most unexpected way.

The word that describes this wonderful story of Mary is incarnation. William Willimon tells us what incarnation means according to this story. He says, "Incarnation means the God who stands outside of time enters into time, the God who is infinite becomes finite, the God who is all-powerful becomes all-vulnerable...The key to understanding incarnation is to think small."

The 13th century poet Jelaluddin Rumi tells a story about a woman whose baby crawled out on the roof of the house near an open water drain. The mother could not physically go out to rescue her child. The roof would not hold her and a ladder would not reach. She thought of calling the strongest man in the village but such a large man could not climb the roof and would frighten the child directly into the danger. And the baby would not listen to her. She talked to the child, but the child did not understand what she was saying. Nothing would coax the child back to safety. The woman ran away quickly to consult a sage named Ali. Ali told her to take another baby up to the roof. The woman did so, and when her child saw the other baby, he crawled away from the edge and back to safety.

In Bethlehem, the gift of God came quietly to a world filled with senseless noise. In Bethlehem, the gift of God came without fanfare to a world that paid attention to people of strength and status. In Bethlehem, the gift of God came in the person of a tiny baby to a world that was consumed by the big and the powerful.

If we are to receive the gift of the Christ Child at Christmas, we must be like Mary. We must act in faith. We have to reshape our thinking about the ways of the world and consider instead the ways of God. We must let go of our ideas of gaining power and having to prove our worth. Instead we must focus on the small and the vulnerable. We must prepare for a gift of God that comes in times and place where we least expect it to happen.