

Sermon Advent II 2014 Luke 1:26-39 & I Thessalonians 5:16-24

What to expect when we are expecting...to be called.

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Before I get to the heart of this sermon I want to talk briefly about the one word in this story that offends us. That word is virgin. And I am not talking about the word virgin offending us because of its sexual connotation. I am talking about the idea that this story is expecting us to believe, that a woman could conceive and carry a child while remaining a virgin. It is pretty hard for us as 21<sup>st</sup> century beings who know pretty much all there is to know about the biology of having babies to be expected to swallow this.

So before we allow ourselves to be offended by what this story is asking of us, let us remember that when we take the bible seriously but not literally we are here to notice and digest the truth of the story, to get to the heart of the story, not to debate the facts. So let us not get stuck by allowing ourselves to be distracted from the truth by trying to figure out those facts. The truth helps us to focus on the meaning of the story for our lives at this time and place. The truth of Mary's virginity may illustrate to us that God calls everyone- even those who are inexperienced in love. Maybe when we get to the heart of this story, it really is about us.

This is a story about a young woman who is waiting. She along with her people, are waiting for the Messiah to come and to deliver them from a life of poverty and oppression. And they are hoping and praying that the coming of the Messiah is imminent. The people of God are expecting that

the messiah will change their world- lift them from their troubles, restore peace to the nations that seem to be in perpetual conflict with themselves and each other and help them to unravel themselves from their part in a society that preached peace on the one hand yet ruled with an iron fist on the other hand. And as Mary is waiting and expecting all of this to come, something astounding happens. She has found favour with God. An angel comes to visit her, she is called by God.

When we watch and wait, look for and expect God to be in our midst, just like Mary, we can expect to be called. Called by God. Called for a specific, holy purpose. Called to a specific deep purpose- to a vocation, to a role that makes a difference in someone else's life, to a passion for others, to a specific cause that somehow makes the world a better place. And we are all called in smaller ways- not to things that are small, but to things that are of a lesser time commitment or take less energy in life. Those things that we are called to on a daily basis. Some of us might be excited by this idea of God calling us to a purpose, no matter how deep. If you are like me, you might have a different hope. You might be trying to live your life unnoticed by God, doing your best to stay off of God's radar screen.

Because you know from experience that God's call is never simple, takes effort and is hardly ever easy. This story of Mary tells us the truth of that. Her call to bear God's son when she wasn't yet married would have brought her shame, ostracism and even danger. And we know that in the end it brought her much heartache. God's call is one that often invites us to open our lives and our hearts to the messiness and riskiness and the weeping and wailing of the world around us.

And I think that we here at Cloverdale know what that means. Over the past month I wonder whether we have been called, by God. Maybe even called to serve Christ himself. Many of you know that since the weather took a turn to below freezing temperatures a few weeks ago, we have had Joe sleeping on our front steps. Now, I don't know a lot about Joe. Only what he has told me- that he is an Inuit man from the North, the Yukon I heard. And that Joe was in a helicopter accident and is here on the lower mainland trying to get some treatment. He has some grown adult children who live up north. And I am not sure if everything that I have just told you is part of the fact or the truth of this story. I do know that he has an aversion to shelters; that he has proven to be harmless; that he is very articulate; that he sometimes has a tremor in his hand; that he doesn't seem to have much money but has the intention of paying you back, that he knows how to say thank you and that he has an expectation that people will be kind to each other.

God, through Joe, has calls us. Calls us to forget our prejudices, to loosen up our defenses and to open our hearts. And I know that some of you have heard this call in a bigger way than others. Some of you have taken the time to talk to Joe, to smile at him, to listen to his banter. Some of you have brought warm clothing for him and given him money. Some of you have welcomed him into our building to warm up. Some of you have made tea and hotdogs for him, searched for cookies in our fridge and freezer. Some of you have come back here late at night and checked on him.

So you know just like Mary did, what it means to be called by God. It disturbs our routine, it asks us to follow without knowing where, and it is scary. Being called by God means you will say yes to something that is unknown, that has no guarantees, no rules, no predictable outcome. It means that your life will be more unsettled, maybe get riskier. It means you will get involved in relationships that will be different from the relationships that you choose for yourself. And these relationships may be uncomfortable at times. They may ask things of you that you won't expect or that you won't want to do. Being called by God, means that you may have to give up your control and get involved in something that may be messy and even dangerous.

We don't know if Joe is giving us facts, we don't know how long he will be hanging around here, we don't know if as our relationship grows, whether we might be asked to give up something precious, like more of our time. Sacrifice might be something we could expect to be called to.

I think the scariest thing about a relationship with someone like Joe is that we might fall in love with him. We might care about him so much, that it will be hard to let him sleep in a sleeping bag in below 0 temperatures while we sit in here and pray that the homeless will be sheltered. It will be hard, as some of you already know, to be asked to give up time late at night or just when we are wanting to hurry off to our next task of the day. It will be hard when he disappears one day in the same way that he appeared to us and we won't know where he is or what ever happened to him.

I just want to talk a little bit about my experience and my practices with folks like Joe. I have had some experience over the years with the

homeless in my capacity as a minister with the folks who come knocking on the church door looking for help and a handout and with some of my experiences at First United on the downtown eastside. And one of the hardest things I find is to juggle the intense feelings of compassion and caring that come when you meet someone like Joe. My immediate response is to want to give them money, or find them a job or even sometimes I have wanted to take them home with me. Especially when I acknowledge that my own life is privileged with ample resources to provide food, shelter, clothing and lots of life's extras for my own family.

One of the difficult things in a call from God, which is always the main component of a call from God- is the request to love- to love without any strings attached. And to love while still keeping my own boundaries intact. Because having good boundaries is just as important in keeping the other person safe and cared for as it is for you.

So what are some of the ways that we answer a call to love without any strings attached while still maintaining boundaries? Having good boundaries means allowing yourself to think as well as feel in the situation. It means holding the feelings of caring and compassion in one hand and using your good, clear thinking skills as well. For me it means not letting down too many safeguards until I have had a chance to get to know the person a bit and assess whether they are using alcohol or drugs. If they are, then money for their addiction will be one of their first priorities and they may go to extreme means to get it. It means making sure that I am aware of my physical surroundings when I am with them. That I don't get myself in a situation where I will be alone or can't get away. It means I try to keep

myself apprised of the supports that are available. You can dial the number 211 at anytime of the day or night and an operator will tell you the address of the nearest shelter that has space. It means I won't divulge information about myself, like my last name or my phone number or where I live. It means I am watchful that the person is not put in a situation where they will be tempted.

For me, it means that I won't give out money. I just have that rule for myself. I will give out help in any other way I can- warm clothing, food, tea, a place to warm up. But I personally do not give money. And this is a very personal thing that you will have to decide for yourself what you want to do about. There is no right or wrong way to handle a request for money. I have good friends that argue that everyone needs money to survive in our culture and they give out money. Now all of the above might change as I get to know a person, because boundaries are fluid as a relationship grows. Each situation is different and using your thinking ability and intuition alongside your feelings is a good rule of thumb.

Having good boundaries for me is also about my own expectations. When I am with someone who is different from me culturally or socioeconomically, I try not to be disappointed or judgmental if someone does not show gratitude or does not want to eat the food I have offered or take the warm coat that seems perfectly right for the situation or go to the shelters that are provided. I try to remember that my call is to love without strings attached and that means allowing myself not to have to or be able to understand the circumstances and life experiences of another that make them have different responses or preferences or choices than I would. We

can be assured that when we answer God's call to love things may get messy, our regular patterns will be disturbed, we will have to make sacrifices. Maybe all of these are the right soil for love to grow. Maybe this is one of the truths that we find in the story of the virgin Mary consenting to be the mother of Jesus.

I am not sure where Joe is right now. He hasn't been around this week. Last Sunday he told me that he was having surgery at UBC this week, I didn't get any more details than that. Fact or truth, I don't know. I don't know if Joe will show up again and want us to help in his recovery from surgery or ask for money or food, and refuse to go to a men's shelter like he is wont to do. I don't know if this time of getting to know Joe will change us- maybe as a community we will learn to be more open, more generous, more compassionate. Maybe we will never see him again. I don't know. All I know is what the last words that James read to us this morning remind us- That no matter where our relationship with Joe leads us..... The one who calls us is faithful.

Thanks be to God.