

The Fourth  
Sunday of  
Advent

The Rev.  
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Luke 1:26-38 Fourth Sunday of Advent 2011

### Hail Mary

Have you ever just longed for something? Can you remember what that feels like? "I just long for this day to be over" you might think in the midst of a difficult day at work. Or, "I have long hoped she would turn her life around and be what I know she's capable of being," A parent might sigh about an adult child who's lost her way.

We long for grief over loss to end, we long for warmth after a long season of cold... Longing—it implies a promise of something as yet unfulfilled.

Now think of expectation or anticipation... "I expect my family to arrive at any minute" you might say with excitement if you've been far from them and at last you are going to be together.

"I'm expecting my husband, wife, son or daughter to get back from Iraq in time for Christmas" many families are saying now with great anticipation that they will at last be able to lay their fears about their loved ones safety to rest.

So while feelings of longing implies that a promise or hope of something better is as of yet unfulfilled; expectation or anticipation hints that that which we have longed for --for so long--is finally within our reach.

Anticipation builds up like an electric current that fills us with a jittery euphoria.

Over the last four weeks we have been traveling a journey that moves us from longing to anticipation: We sing: O come, O Come Emmanuel as each week leads us closer to the fulfillment of God's promise of a Messiah.

And finally, this morning, we meet Mary along that dusty little road in a town that literally makes "in the middle of nowhere" seem like a burgeoning metropolis.

Mary and Nazareth are as backwater as they come. But here we are, and we find that to this *extraordinarily ordinary* girl who is in the midst of a just another boring chore, God's messenger comes with an invitation that will change the world forever.

Now I must confess that early in my own journey of faith Mary and I were uneasy companions. The BVM, as she is sometimes known, seemed to me a curiosity at best and an excuse to keep women subservient at worst.

"Look at Mary's unwavering obedience" and keep your mouth shut woman!" was the message many women have heard over the years in churches all over the world.

But if we take a closer look at Mary as we find her in scripture and put away all of the "junk" that has been piled up around her feet until she has become utterly obscured by superstition or misogyny, we find a compelling figure who has much to teach us about faith, courage, and an unwavering participation with God's purposes for the world that is utterly astounding.

Peel away the nonsense and we see in Mary a woman-child of immense courage who made up her mind to say "yes" to God outside the law of her people and risked everything to do what God asked of her. She did this without heed to what it would cost her socially, publically, and spiritually. <sup>1</sup>

In fact Mary as we meet her in Scripture deliberates with the angel. In a culture within which she held no status, she makes a personal decision to share in the divine plan of salvation regardless of the cost of such a decision would cost her in her culture.

God did not force Mary. Without her "Here am I" God might have either moved on to the next town or rethought this Incarnation idea altogether.

<sup>1</sup> Joan Chittister, *In Search of Belief*, Ligouri/Triumph, Missouri, 1999, pg. 95.

But, we'll never know what "Plan B" would have been because in fact Mary did say "yes!" And of course we have spilled a lot of blood, sweat and tears as well as written pages and pages of doctrine around this notion of a "virgin birth."

But this is just more static added to Mary's story---for me the real miracle isn't around how Jesus was conceived, but around the fact that in a culture where Mary's unplanned pregnancy should have spelled a horrible death or expulsion and shame, somehow this girl and this child were allowed to live and give birth to God's hope for the human family.

Mary is a powerful reminder that God cares deeply about the human condition. God chose this seemingly unremarkable young woman to do the most extraordinary thing that God has ever attempted---to become flesh and live among us.

God chooses the most unlikely suspect as God's greatest agent of transformation and hope. Mary's story reminds us that God can use very ordinary people---of any age or background---to accomplish extraordinary things.

In Mary we are reminded that we should expect God to show up not only in inspired worship, beautiful art, and elegant theology, but also where poor people are forgotten, vulnerable people are oppressed, and weak people are overlooked.

Mary is herself an exemplar of the most distinctive characteristics of Biblical faith---namely the *profound* compassion of God. Far too often we are co-opted by the image of an all-powerful, omnipotent, omniscient, "in light inaccessible" God.

We can turn God into an intimidating horror, but Mary always brings us back to the "really real" God of infinite compassion and love.

We of all people---folks who prize erudite theological presentations of God that are heady, but in fact challenge us very little in terms of discipleship-----we are perhaps most susceptible to forgetting some very salient home truths about this God whom we worship and anticipate becoming flesh in the birth of Jesus.

But Mary reminds us that while heady intellectual gymnastics might have a small place in our journey of faith, what matters most is the acknowledgment that beyond our well reasoned theology, there are suffering people, oppressed people, sick people, and dying people who yearn for a word of hope in the face of hopelessness.

Mary, who at the end, held the lifeless body of her son in her arms, is a reminder to the mother whose son was killed in Afghanistan, or on the streets of Seattle, of the mercy, compassion and nearness of God.<sup>2</sup>

She also reminds us that at any time in any place God can choose to break into human history with an act that brings the mighty to contrition and the poor and inconsequential into a divine partnership that can change the world forever. "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."

Mary reminds us that *we* too are called to bear God into the world.

So here we stand, trembling on the brink of remembering when we first saw God become flesh through the extraordinary participation of this very ordinary young girl.

Her yes made it possible for the whole world to see the true face and heart of God.

I am reminded of Meister Eckhart, the medieval mystic and theologian who wrote: "We are all meant to be mothers of God.

What good is it to me," he continued, "if this eternal birth of the divine Son takes place unceasingly but does not take place within myself? And, what good is it to me if Mary is full of grace if I am not also full of grace?"

What good is it to me for the Creator to give birth to a Son if I do not also give birth to him in my time and culture? This then," he writes, "is the fullness of time:

When the Son of God----- is begotten in each of us."

Hail Christians, full of grace the Lord is you. Blessed are you among people, and blessed is the child of grace and peace that all of us are asked to bring into the world.

Mary meets us at that tremulous intersection where our longing for a better world can be transformed into anticipation that God *is* ever-present and that *WE---ALL OF US---* are part of God's own long time longing for justice and peace on the Earth.

Dear God, let it be with all of us, according to your word...Amen.

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<sup>2</sup>*Preaching God's Transformative Justice*, Westminster John Knox Press, 2011, pg. 31-32.