

2 Samuel 7:1-11 New International Version God's Promise to David

7 After the king was settled in his palace and the LORD had given him rest from all his enemies around him, ² he said to Nathan the prophet, "Here I am, living in a house of cedar, while the ark of God remains in a tent."

³ Nathan replied to the king, "Whatever you have in mind, go ahead and do it, for the LORD is with you."

⁴ But that night the word of the LORD came to Nathan, saying:

⁵ "Go and tell my servant David, 'This is what the LORD says: Are you the one to build me a house to dwell in? ⁶ I have not dwelt in a house from the day I brought the Israelites up out of Egypt to this day. I have been moving from place to place with a tent as my dwelling. ⁷ Wherever I have moved with all the Israelites, did I ever say to any of their rulers whom I commanded to shepherd my people Israel, "Why have you not built me a house of cedar?"'"

⁸ "Now then, tell my servant David, 'This is what the LORD Almighty says: I took you from the pasture, from tending the flock, and appointed you ruler over my people Israel. ⁹ I have been with you wherever you have gone, and I have cut off all your enemies from before you. Now I will make your name great, like the names of the greatest men on earth. ¹⁰ And I will provide a place for my people Israel and will plant them so that they can have a home of their own and no longer be disturbed. Wicked people will not oppress them anymore, as they did at the beginning ¹¹ and have done ever since the time I appointed leaders^[a] over my people Israel. I will also give you rest from all your enemies.

"The LORD declares to you that the LORD himself will establish a house for you:

Romans 16:25-27 New International Version

²⁵ Now to him who is able to establish you in accordance with my gospel, the message I proclaim about Jesus Christ, in keeping with the revelation of the mystery hidden for long ages past, ²⁶ but now revealed and made known through the prophetic writings by the command of the eternal God, so that all the Gentiles might come to the obedience that comes from faith— ²⁷ to the only wise God be glory forever through Jesus Christ! Amen.

Luke 1:26-38 New International Version The Birth of Jesus Foretold

²⁶ In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, ²⁷ to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸ The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you."

²⁹ Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. ³⁰ But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. ³¹ You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. ³² He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, ³³ and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end."

³⁴ "How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?"

³⁵ The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called^[a] the Son of God. ³⁶ Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. ³⁷ For no word from God will ever fail."

³⁸ "I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May your word to me be fulfilled." Then the angel left her.

Sermon. As we approach Christmas this week, our Advent readings touch on God's promise to David that He would establish a house forever for David. Then, in the Gospel reading and our call to worship this morning – God's promise – perhaps challenge - to Mary and her response to that challenge. We're going to go deeper into the texts in a moment, but this is 2020, we are in the middle of a deadly pandemic that is hitting the western lakes and mountains region – our home – hard.

This week I read a book about post World War 2, pre-independence Israel and several Holocaust refugees who went there. Each person had a different mindset and one of them simply could not deal with a God who allowed the Holocaust to happen. Psychologists and greeting card writers too frequently wax on about mystery and offer platitudes. Here we are in the middle of a pandemic

that is quickly overtaking total American combat deaths in World War 2 (418,640). The scope of what we are enduring now is stunning. Like the Holocaust survivor, we might ask where God is in all this – and that is a good question for this Advent season.

Centuries ago plagues swept Europe, killing up to $\frac{3}{4}$ of the population. A woman, Julia of Norwich, fell deadly ill and thought she would die. At the hardest point of her illness she experienced a number of theophanies, with God appearing to her. In her first vision she was led, by the Spirit, to look not at heaven but at the Cross. The lesson she learned was that God was not absent, gazing down from heaven, at her and others in their sickness, but there with her and experiencing it, just as He did on the Cross. He is God with us.

In another vision, it went like this:

“And in this he showed me a little thing, the quantity of a hazel nut, lying in the palm of my hand, as it seemed. And it was as round as any ball. I looked upon it with the eye of my understanding, and thought, ‘what may this be?’ And it was answered generally thus, ‘It is all that is made.’ I marveled how it might last, for I thought it might suddenly have fallen to nothing for littleness. And I was answered in my understanding: It lasts and ever shall, for God loves it. And so have all things their beginning by the love of God. “In this little thing I saw three properties. The first is that God made it. The second that God loves it. And the third, that God keeps it.”

Now, neither of these visions offers a rationale for the plagues sweeping Europe then, or the pandemic sweeping the world and us now. Indeed, the plagues then were due to miserable public health and the current pandemic, perhaps, a version of that same phenomena. What these experiences do tell us is that God is not absent – He remains here, with us, experiencing, as He did on the Cross, our suffering. This is not some god who looks at us as if we are entertainment, but as our very engaged Creator, Savior and Sustainer who is right here with us. Our God, Emmanuel. I do not think that the pandemic now, and plagues then are a function of God seeking to inflict pain on us. I do think that they are all a function of our own failure to live in Creation as He has made it. But God has not left us to our own devices in this, He is with us and, like the people of Israel in the wilderness, seeking to lead us.

And that brings us back to Advent and this announcement of Gabriel to Mary. It is straight forward and we all know the story. God has selected Mary to give birth to the Messiah. Viewed from the 21st Century, we check this story off in

our list of things to remember in this season, and then go back to preparing for Christmas Eve and Christmas. But, this is significant and should trigger in our own thoughts, *“how would I respond?”*

Mary was being told (*not asked*) that her life was about to be changed forever – turned upside down immediately. She had no idea how Joseph would react to her pregnant condition and was too aware, as a young Jewish woman of the time, that her pregnancy - not by Joseph – could result in deadly repercussions. At best she would be labeled a harlot and at worst an adulteress who should be stoned to death. Today’s text says that she was troubled, but I suspect a better word would be terrified. Yet, her response to the news was to not just accept the reality but to embrace it. Her response was to articulate that she was there to glorify God. That is the lesson for today.

I’ll tell you again a story from after Hurricane Katrina struck the Gulf Coast. I had been sent down by my Navy boss for the purpose of training some Coast Guard sailors in how to use and tend our materials on their ship. That was the extent of it. On that first Monday of the work week, during lunch I went over to the small Navy Exchange on the vest pocket base at Pascagoula – sort of the routine pilgrimage Navy folks do when assessing the lay of the land wherever they have been dropped. There was only a single vehicle outside the Exchange, with a Presbyterian Disaster Assistance logo on it. Since there was only a single customer in the Exchange besides me, I went over and asked him if that was his vehicle. Yes. And in short order he launched into a very serious challenge to me personally to get my act together, revisit my priorities and to come down to the Gulf Coast to undertake relief work there. I was stunned at the vehemence with which he spoke. He did not press me up against the shelves, but came close to that. I drove through the damage after work that afternoon and visited the work camp he ran. And I got it. The Navy had paid me to work with the Coasties there, but I concluded that the real reason I had gone down was to experience the need. To see a part of Creation that called for help.

The point is that each of us receives a call – an annunciation – as Mary did. We may get them repeatedly. We may hear them clearly – the retired Air Force colonel’s challenge to me was, I think, just that. Yet we may hear them only as a still noise – perhaps even silence in the absence of noise. We must pay attention to God’s reach for us. Mary’s response was to embrace her new role in God’s Creation and glorify Him.

We have all known or seen moments when God has called and His call has been ignored. For decades I have been haunted by an experience early on in

Virginia. It was a simple thing – a woman was asked if she would serve as a deacon. She seemed committed, God fearing and a natural. She said no – basically that she was too busy with life and would be ready for such things when her work and family life subsided. It never happened. Now, I don't see this as a Divine consequence, but sometime later she was diagnosed with Parkinson's and never again had an opportunity to serve. Again, I absolutely do not see this as a punishment for her failure to be a Mary in this call. But it is, for sure, a sad reality that we each have moments in our lives when we become aware of God's need for us. His annunciation to us. Perhaps we will be so blessed as to receive multiple calls, so that if we turn one down we will have opportunities. But we do not know that. We know only that God gives us this moment, just as he gave it to Mary. Just as He gave it to Moses at the bush. To Joshua. To Elisha. To the disciples. To Esther. To Jonah. It is up to us how we respond. We can be Mary. Or we could be Jonah. How are we responding to God's call and plan for us? Creation – the world we live in – is designed as a place where we – mankind – are to be integrally involved in God's work. We do not get to take a break from this for Christmas, and we are reminded of that by Mary's story. Whom will you be? Who will be your model? Jonah? Mary?

In this season of Advent, as we remember that God is with us - Emmanuel – we are empowered by His grace alone, through faith alone, by the atonement of Christ alone, by the revelation of Scripture alone so that we may give all glory to God alone. In whatever way He has individually or corporately called us.

Remember Julia of Norwich's summary –

In this little thing I saw three properties. The first is that God made it. The second that God loves it. And the third, that God keeps it.

Mary was called by God, in His love, to be a part of His keeping of this small thing we call our world, our lives. How are we – how are you – being called to be part of God's keeping of this world He has placed us in? What are we – you – doing to respond to God's grace and be part of this Creational keeping?

Soli Deo Gloria.

Amen.