

“Nothing Will Be Impossible”
 Psalm 89:1-4, Luke 1: 26-38
 Advent4/B, December 18, 2011
 Lynne M. Dolan

She was about thirteen years old. My ninth grade Wednesday School class found that incredible. She was engaged to be married to an older man, probably about 18 years old. It was typical for a young woman of her age to be engaged. I remember being thirteen. I hardly thought about marriage at thirteen. I remember just becoming interested in boys at that age. I remember the hormonal shifts and the behavioral changes that hit me like a tsunami. I remember arguing with my sister about who was supposed to clean the kid’s bathroom this week. I remember my grandfather coming to live with us and the household dynamics changing in an instant. It was an in between time; no longer a child and not wanting to be treated like one, but not yet an adult (and not ready to behave like one.)

Just as Mary is getting used to the idea of marrying Joseph, an astonishing thing happens. Well, astonishing might not be strong enough. It was truly a miracle. Out of nowhere, an angel appears to Mary. In a moment her adolescence and innocence disappear. That one brush with heaven and her life changes forever. Now Mary is part of a great fraternity or sorority in her case, of people who have encountered God and have had their lives instantly change. The list is extensive. The preacher Rick Morley remembers, “Abraham had to pick up and move away from the land of his fathers, and raise a child in his twilight years. Moses found a bush on fire, and ended up speaking before the principalities of this world on behalf of the Principality of the Cosmos. Joshua. Deborah. Gideon. Samson. Saul. David, the youngest boy in a long line of brothers – he was just watching sheep one day when someone called him in from the field. Isaiah. Jeremiah.”¹ And now there is Mary.

God doesn’t ask Mary to go anywhere or ask her to persuade a person in authority to do something on behalf of her kinfolk. God asks Mary to bear a child, God’s child. She is perplexed and can not understand how this is even possible, since she is not yet married and is still a virgin. The angel tries to comfort her saying, “Don’t be afraid.” If an angel ever speaks these three words to you, you know you are in big trouble. It is kind of like the dentist saying, “This won’t hurt a bit,” as he revs up the drill and prepares to enter your mouth. Be afraid, be very afraid. We see Mary here in all her humanity, acting as any of us might under the circumstances. The angel tells her not to fear because the Holy Spirit will overshadow her and this is how she will become pregnant. Phew, that explanation makes everything better. Mary is either too naïve or much more faithful than I. I would need to know more before I would agree to such an outrageous plan. I am not sure why or how Mary has the presence of mind or strength of faith to finally say, “Sure God, do whatever you want to me.”

¹ Rick Morley, “Gutsy Faith, Greater than the Angels: A reflection on the Annunciation,” December 5, 2011.

I am sure that if an angel invited me at age 13 to secretly have a child my first response would not have been “Sure God, go ahead.” My first thought would more likely have been “I don’t think so God. Have you met my parents? If I come home and tell them that I am pregnant before I am married they will kill me” Where is the angel when that conversation takes place? None of this made any sense. Why in the world would God choose her, of all people, to do this astonishing thing? She is a complete nobody. She comes from a town that nobody cares about. She is a simple teenage girl doing what teenage girls do. She is not from a prominent family. There is no reason anyone can think of for God to choose her.

Can you think back to an experience in your life where out of nowhere someone says we have to talk and what they share changed your whole world? Kids, dad’s been transferred and we are moving to Atlanta (I was probably Mary’s age when this happened to me.) Perhaps you recall telling a child you are going to have a baby, or telling your children you have decided to divorce. Maybe it’s the moment your parents tell you that the doctor has diagnosed Mom’s unusual behavior as early onset Alzheimer’s disease. Perhaps it was the moment you sat your parents down and told them you were gay. Life is like that. There are defining moments that change our lives forever. The news we receive is important. The way we respond to it is a witness to our faith.

We can withstand anything because Mary assures us that all things are possible with God. Alone I might not have the courage to do what needs to be done or receive that challenging news, but with God all things are possible. Somehow Mary, in all her 13 years, understood this. Once Mary gets over the shock, she needs to be sure that God has the right person. She has done nothing that could possibly lead her to become pregnant, with anyone’s child, so maybe God has the wrong person. She is not yet ready to face the prospect of starting a family, so maybe God has the wrong person. But the angel assures Mary that God has not gotten it wrong. She is the one God has chosen to be the God bearer. Mary doesn’t yet understand what this means, but she will have plenty of time, as all pregnant mothers do, to contemplate her situation. For now, the most miraculous thing is that Mary says yes.

This is what makes this story truly miraculous; Mary says yes. She does not ask the angel to give her some time. She does not rush to her Cousin Elizabeth’s house to get her advice. Mary asks a few qualifying questions and then says, “Let it be done with me according to your word.” Mary says yes, and unlike many of her spiritual ancestors, she does not try to wriggle out of it once she agrees to God’s plan. She does not run away and hide from God. She does not have second thoughts. Perhaps it was easier for her to ascent to God because she is so young. As a young woman in that culture, you do what your elders tell you to do. I imagine our defiance grows as we age, but Mary agrees without much protest. In fact, as you read further in the story, Mary not only agrees but she sings a song of praise to God in response. In her song, which we will sing as a hymn in just a moment, Mary understands what God is doing in ways no typical teenager could. This is just the beginning. Change is coming and her child will be the one to initiate this change. Not as an infant, but in time, we will come to understand God’s plan. By choosing not a royal young woman, but a peasant girl to participate in God’s work, God

is sending the world a message about God's preferential option for the poor, the lowly, the weak and forgotten ones.

I have studied liberation theology since I was in college. I have heard of God's preferential option for the poor. Apparently God also has a preferential option for the unlikely. Mary is the next in a long line of prophets that don't believe God has gotten it right. Prophets that think they are too young, or can't speak well enough or who believe no one will pay attention to what they say. God uses those whom others would think unlikely in many marvelous ways. I remember being only slightly older than Mary and walking away from church. Perhaps I behaved like many teenagers do, telling my parents I was no longer interested in church and wanting nothing to do with God. Even though I had gone to church faithfully until I was baptized at 13 it was all downhill after that. The church I attended did not have a strong youth program. No one was invested in my spiritual formation. In my turbulent adolescence I was adrift and looking for answers. They did not come from my family or my church. I became more like Saul, an angry, persecuting, young adult. I never did anything violent however, I said some pretty rude things against God and the church. God has a preferential option for the unlikely and I guess I was among them.

My angel was one of the RA's in my freshman dorm who was the chairperson of the chaplain's council. He could see in me a longing I was not ready to admit. He would observe me in worship as I sang in the chapel choir. He could tell this angry girl persona was not who I was called to be. We had a conversation one day where he invited me to think about joining the council. I protested much as Mary did. I assumed that God had gotten it wrong; there must be some other person God wanted to fulfill this role. I know I was not being called to give birth to the Christ child, but God was inviting me nonetheless, to be a God-bearer. God is in the God-bearing business, calling us to make God's love and mercy and compassion and justice real in this world. It is what God does, all the time. None of us feels competent or worthy or capable of saying yes. Then we hear the angel saying, "Greetings, favored one!" and Mary's assurance, "all things are possible with God" and we summons the courage to say yes to invitations that frankly scare the be Jesus out of us.

Mary's experience was unique; however God continues to call each of us to embrace an incarnational spirituality where God is made real for this world in this time. This is the way God keeps being born in the world, whenever we say, "Yes, God, let it be." I have found that God doesn't take no for an answer and God doesn't make mistakes. It does no good to argue with the angel or try to find a loophole. God knows what God knows and simply waits for us to respond, "Let it be." No matter what outrageous thing we are called to do and where we are called to go, God is there with us, just as God was with Mary. When we say yes, everything falls into place, we have what we need to move forward and our fears disappear. As we hear this story again, Luke invites us to stop observing Mary or even marveling at her and to start imitating her. Let it be...Lord, let it be. Amen