

Fourth Sunday of Advent – Year B – The Rev. Jennifer B. Cleveland 12.24.23
Advent 4B: 2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16; Romans 16:25-27; Luke 1:26-38

This Advent season has been moving very quickly and as soon as the closing blessing is offered at the end of this liturgy, things will start moving quickly again. As we finish the greening of the church and head into Christmas Eve, some of us will be here again tonight or tomorrow. Some of us will be heading out to celebrate Christmas Eve and Christmas Day in other ways. So this particular moment is a pause, a moment to catch our breath and be still. When the angel Gabriel comes to Mary, greeting her with great enthusiasm, calling her the favored one, and bringing news that she is to bear Jesus, the Son of the Most High, Mary's response is an underwhelmed, *Huh?*

The focus of her wondering, *How can this be?* has often been on how a virgin can or cannot become pregnant. (This was a topic of great interest when I was in middle school.) Hers isn't the first *How can this be?* that the angel Gabriel heard. Six months prior to Mary's *Huh?*, when the angel visits Zechariah to let Zechariah know that his wife, Elizabeth, will bear a child (aka John the Baptist), Zechariah asks the same question: *How can this be?* Mary is at one end of the spectrum of "Huh's" (too young, too poor) and Zechariah and Elizabeth are at the other end (too old, past their prime). The list of reasons for their collective *Huh's?* might include these descriptors: they are too insignificant, irrelevant, forgotten, on the margins, scorned, ignored, left out, left-behind, of no importance. They would have had no expectation that God, or anyone else for that matter, would have noticed them. And in response to all of that, the Angel Gabriel merely says, *The Holy Spirit will come to you.*

We all have different reasons for disbelieving that the Holy could or would want to come to us. Reasons for doubting that we would ever be remembered, much less sought out and greeted as a favored one. Our reasons might be varied: I am too tired. Too full of limitations and inconsistencies. Too cynical. The world is too messed up and I have burned too many bridges. I have never really belonged. I am too much of an outsider, at the margins of every power structure. Favored? No. Not possible. And in response to all of that, the Angel Gabriel merely says, *The Holy Spirit will come to you.* In looking at Helen's title for her drawing of Mary and Jesus, on the cover of the bulletin, I think the Angel Gabriel might have added, *Believe this message. Believe in yourself.*

In spite of her initial, *Huh?* Mary ends up receiving that message from the Angel. If you think about it, the fact that she received that message might be the real miracle of the Annunciation. It is often the quietest, smallest moments that are the most powerful. Where things begin to shift. During this pause this morning, take another look at the different depictions of Mary out in the Gallery and on the cover of the bulletin. Each rendering brings out a different facet of Mary receiving that message.

Madeleine L'Engle called this season the *irrational season* and here is what she says about this very moment:

*This is the irrational season
When love blooms bright and wild.
Had Mary been filled with reason
There'd have been no room for the child.*

(M. L'Engle, **The Irrational Season**, p. 27)

We need to take advantage of this moment—this irrational moment—because the next time Advent 4 falls on Christmas Eve is not until 2028! In the midst of all there is left to do, it is irrational to pause to receive the words spoken by the angel, to welcome them into our own bodies and souls. But that is what I'd like to invite us all to do. You may want to hold your hands in an open position or put one hand over your heart.

Begin by acknowledging your distractions and disbelief that these words might be meant for you. Breathe and receive these words, so that they sink deep within you, to those places within that you think are most inaccessible to the Holy Spirit:

Greetings, favored one! // God is with you. // Do not be afraid. // You have found favor with God.

And now, breathe again, and receive these words, deep within. And as you breathe out, extend this greeting to all of your family and friends:

Greetings, favored one! // God is with you. // Do not be afraid. // You have found favor with God.

And now, breathe again, and receive these words, deep within. And as you breathe out, extend this greeting to all: to strangers and enemies; to those in places of the world who weigh heavily on your heart; to those people, creatures, and all places and situations where there is pain, to all the whole Earth: *Greetings, favored one! // God is with you. // Do not be afraid. // You have found favor with God. // The Holy Spirit is with you.*

With great irrationality in this moment, may we echo Mary: *Here I am. May it be so.*