

Listening To The Lord

Luke 1:26-38

December 18, 2011

I.

This could be your lucky day. Or maybe not. You get to hear a sermon while people at the 10:00 am service will miss that opportunity. Seriously, however, our annual Festival of Lessons and Music is on tap for them. It will be a good program, and if you have free time later this morning I urge you to come back to hear some familiar scriptures and wonderful music.

Christmas is coming whether we're ready or not. We celebrate our Lord's birth next Saturday evening, we exchange gifts next Sunday, and then for many of us, it's over. It's simply over. We move on to New Year's Eve, football games, and the beginning of Mardi Gras six days later.

But this season also brings an opportunity to reflect on the events of the year. Perhaps we might do that as we consider new year's resolutions for 2012, or simply as we recall the many things that have happened since last Christmas.

And among those reflections we might find remembrances of difficult decisions, or choices with which we would rather not have been faced. Perhaps some matters are not yet resolved and there still are decisions or choices to be made.

In those situations we all want to do the right thing. Sometimes it is not easy. And sometimes what the world proclaims is not what God would have us do. Today's Gospel reading about Mary, and her obedience to God's will, is the classic example of how the Holy Spirit leads us to do things we never would have considered on our own.

Our reading describes what the church calls the Annunciation, when the angel Gabriel told Mary—announced to Mary—that God wanted her to bear his Son, Jesus. And just to give a preview and digress a little, between now and Pentecost next May we will celebrate eight more significant events like this in which our Lord Jesus Christ is the central character.

In all those cases the names of the events are derived from verbs that describe the action, and to which the ending "-ion" is added to make them into nouns. The words "dedicate" and "dedication" work this way. So do "create" and "creation."

As a result, in addition to today's Annunciation, there also is the Visitation, Incarnation, Adoration, Presentation, Transfiguration, Crucifixion, Resurrection, and Ascension. You don't have to remember them all right now; we will talk about them as they come along, and I'm sure you will recognize them. And they all flow from the story we heard today.

II.

So, back to our reading. We all are familiar with this story about Gabriel's angelic appearance to Mary and her miraculous motherhood. And Mary knew right away what Gabriel meant. Even though she soon was to be married to Joseph, she knew Gabriel was not talking about a child to be born of that marriage, but rather supernaturally born of the Holy Spirit.

And, by the way, I don't see any difficulty with this idea of the virgin birth. If God could create the universe and life itself, he certainly could cause Mary to become pregnant.

And Mary had a choice. She could have said "no." She might have wondered how she would explain an unexpected pregnancy to Joseph, to whom she was engaged. How would he react? It also could bring shame to her family. Gabriel's suggestion really could complicate things. And under Hebrew law at the time she could be stoned to death. Maybe it just wouldn't be worth it.

But Mary didn't think that way. She was touched by the Word of God, and experienced an overpowering and compelling force. And remember, this was not a situation where God's Word could fit into the context of familiar things. The idea of conceiving a child by the Holy Spirit was an entirely new concept for everyone. Hard to explain.

But Mary listened to the Lord's plans for her. What she did truly was a leap of faith. And the world has been forever blessed by her obedience, and her decision to honor God.

And perhaps Mary's spirituality might be evidenced by a story. One day in heaven Jesus came to Peter who, in his role as gatekeeper, was sitting at the pearly gates. Jesus complained about some of the people being admitting into heaven, and said they should not be there.

Peter responded, "I know Lord, but what can I do? They come to me and I turn them away. So they go around to the back, talk to your mother, and she lets them in."

IV.

This story of Mary can apply to us today. Many of us probably have been in situations where we sensed that God might have spoken to us. And if those instances do not come to mind, don't be so sure that they haven't happened anyway. God is there if we call him, and also sometimes when we don't. All we have to do is listen.

I have told of how my own call to ministry happened in this way, although certainly on a vastly smaller scale. The first time a thought came to me about becoming a priest I rejected it and put it out of my mind. I was a partner in a law firm, my kids were in college, and I wondered what I was thinking.

But the idea returned, and I put it out of my mind again, which became a cycle that regularly repeated itself. This went on almost ten years, and finally I concluded something was at work that I was unable to stop. And so, on faith, I began an eighteen month discernment process, left the law firm, and enrolled in seminary in Virginia full-time for three years. And the rest is history.

This can be typical of how we might be hesitant to believe that occurrences in our lives flow from what truly is God's voice. I'm sure our experiences are not as dramatic as Gabriel's appearance to Mary. They probably are not flash bang things. Most of us don't anticipate that God's interventions in Scripture will happen to us.

And they probably won't, at least not in the same way. But God does appear in our lives. Jesus left the Holy Spirit to guide us, and the Spirit will persist, even if it takes ten years as in my case.

Haven't we sometimes heard people talk of knowing God through intuition, or a sense of compulsion, or a silent revelation, or perhaps a still small voice. These experiences might come from prayer, reading Scripture, sharing with each other, or simply making ourselves open to God.

Moments like that often come when we don't expect them. God relates to us in many different ways. We should not worry if angels have not visited us or appeared in our dreams. We still can know his presence

And this idea can come together in two ways in our lives. The first is apparent from today's reading, and is that as Mary became aware of God's will for her, she did what God wanted her to do. I pray that the same is true for us, and that we also listen for the Lord, even though God's outpouring into our lives likely will be less dramatic.

The second point is that we need not wait for God to take the initiative. Communication with God is a two way street, and it's that way because of God, not because of us. It is God's gift of

his divine presence to us, and through it we can be transformed into the holy and obedient people we were created to be, even though the world tries to pull us in the other direction.

God wants a relationship with us. He is available for us. The line never is busy, and the call is free. We never get put on hold. Operators are on duty 24/7. We can call at any time. But at other times we also have to be ready to listen when he calls us, as he called to Mary.

V.

One of my favorite Bible stories about communicating with God is the Old Testament account of the God's bidding to Samuel to become a prophet. It began when Samuel was a young boy studying and serving in the temple.

One night Samuel was awakened by someone speaking to him. He thought it was Eli, an old priest who also lived in the temple and supervised Samuel's training. So, he went to Eli, but Eli said he had not called. Then the same thing happened a second time, and a third.

On the third occasion Eli realized that the Lord had been calling Samuel and that Samuel had mistaken the voice for Eli's. So Eli told Samuel what to do, and when the Lord called a fourth time, Samuel said, "Speak [Lord] for your servant is listening" (1 Sa. 3:10)

Speak Lord, for your servant is listening. How many times do we say just the opposite? How often do we say "Listen Lord, for your servant is speaking"? How often do we pray in the sending mode rather than the receiving mode?

Now, as I said earlier, there is nothing wrong with speaking to God, for he calls us to do so. But he also calls us to listen, and part of developing a relationship with him is sensing when to do which. Today's reading about Mary's faith and courage illustrates the importance of hearing and not letting our own plans and fears drown out God's voice as the Holy Spirit reveals it to us.

So, as we prepare to celebrate Christ's birth, and as we thank God for the gift of salvation in him, let us also remember to listen and be ready to hear his voice. *Amen.*