

Dec 14 We Are Needed

Luke 1:47-55

I want to begin with an image. It comes from the Olympic Games and the bobsled competition. You have the driver in front and one to three pushers behind. You recall how they rock the sled back and forth and then in a mighty surge push it forward with all of their might and then jump in, the driver steering the sled down the course while the rest hunker down behind. Now that you have that image in your mind where would you place yourself? Where would you place God? I see God as the driver. God is ready to move forward but without our help the plan will not materialize. Advent is a story about how we are needed. It begins with the Angel Gabriel coming to Mary. She hears, she responds and then sings a song.

Mary's song is a song of love to a God who is finally acting on the promises made so long ago. After all these centuries of waiting she has heard the good news that God is sending the Messiah. Mary understands that since she is involved this means that all of the traditional understandings the people had held will be turned on their ears. The rich will be brought low and the poor lifted up. How could it be otherwise when God chooses to use an unimportant girl from a no-name village?

Whenever I reflect on the Christmas story, and specifically the roles Joseph and Mary played in this great drama, I hear again the message that Christmas is a story not just about God who sends Jesus to live among us but also it is about a God who loves and trusts us and most importantly needs us. God used imperfect people like Joseph and Mary to make this miracle happen. I believe part of the story is that God still wants to use us, imperfect though we might be. God loves us, we love God and even more we are needed by God. God has the vision but needs our push, to get back to my image.

When you hear this song of Mary's it should be very clear that God sometimes does the unexpected. The people had been waiting for at least 300 years for a Messiah, perhaps longer, depending upon what dates you use for the first prophetic pronouncements. Over these long years a whole body of ideas had arisen as to what the Messiah would be like, where he would come from, and what he would do. Most of them centered around the idea that he would be a king of David's line. The Messiah would be also, like David, a great military leader who would free them from their

conquerors. This is why later, when Jesus began his ministry most, at least those in authority doubted the claims being made about him. No one expected a Messiah to come from Nazareth. It was an unimportant town that didn't figure in prophecies about the Messiah. Concepts of a wandering preacher being the Messiah instead of a military leader were beyond them. Not too many years later a man of similar background but of a military mind gathered together an army, beginning in Galilee, leading to what was called the first Jewish revolt that ended with the destruction of Jerusalem and the siege of Masada. Much of the leadership flocked behind him because he fit their expectation of what the Messiah should be. So this is a reminder that God often does the unexpected.

So, how has God surprised you? Think about that. You have your idea of how God should handle a situation. You have prayed about it and now expect it to happen. Did it occur that way? On occasion, I am guessing. But most of the time we are amazed at what really occurs. Often we don't even realize the hand of God in the situation until we look back at things later in life because it was so unexpected, sometimes we could even say outrageous. But that is part of this story, to see God in unexpected ways.

I think of the many times I have had a position to be filled and the nominating committee of the church has been struggling with finding the right person. Several times, after much prayer and discernment about the type of person we needed, we still came up with no names or the names we suggested said no. In a couple of instances at about that same time I have had someone come into the office asking how they could help. In desperation I have asked them if they would fill that vacant position. I didn't let them know I was desperate. If they said yes I was often surprised to find a great match to the job and I didn't even know God was answering my prayer.

The second thing this song reminds us of is that God is faithful. God had promised to send a Messiah. The people had been waiting long years. It would have been easy for them to believe God had changed God's mind. But, God is faithful. Not always in our time frames and, as I said answering it in surprising ways, but God keeps God's word. So again, think of your life and think about the promises of God, to be with us, sustain us, and help us. God has always been faithful. We often want answers and solutions on our time schedule but that is not what is offered. I always think about the Apostle Paul. He had something that he called the thorn in the flesh. He talks about how

he several times prayed for God to remove it from him. What was this affliction? Scholars have made many guesses but we don't really know. We do know that Paul felt it got in the way of his ministry and wanted God to fix it. That didn't happen. What did happen is that Paul learned to accept the situation, to learn to be patient, to see how God was at work in his life and ministry in spite of and maybe because of that affliction. God was faithful, not in healing Paul as he wanted, but in being with him in that struggle, letting him know he was loved.

Finally, and for me this is the most important. The birth story is a reminder that God needs people. It is a story of Joseph being faithful when it would have been so hard to do so. He accepted that the child was of the Holy Spirit. He took Mary with him to Bethlehem when convention says she should have stayed home. He takes the family to Egypt when told to in a dream. All along, this great drama would not have happened, at least in the ways we see it unfold without Joseph saying yes continually to the word of God.

And Mary's response is needed as well. Frederick Beuchner writes about this event in a book called *Peculiar Treasures*. "She struck the angel Gabriel as hardly old enough to have a child at all, let alone this child, but he'd been entrusted with a message to give her, and he gave it.

He told her what the child was to be named and who he was to be, and something about the mystery that was to come upon her. "You mustn't be afraid, Mary," he said.

As he said it, he only hoped she wouldn't notice that beneath the great, golden wings he himself was trembling with fear to think that the whole future of creation hung now on the answer of a girl."

That is the power and mystery of this season. God needed Mary. God needed Joseph. The message is still the same God needs you.

Gabriel held his breath and then she says yes. God did not force this upon her, she accepted it. When she says, "Behold the handmaid of the Lord" the great drama of Christmas could happen. Mary pushed off in the sled so God could begin the ride down the mountain.

Have you ever thought about how God needs you? We hear that we are the hands and feet of God but do we really think about what that means for us. It means that in the lives of all those we touch we have a part to play. You might be the answer to their prayer. It happens all the time. Someone needs a ride to the doctor. They have been praying about it. They finally reach out to a friend or family member. When they hear, "Yes, I can take you" they are hearing more than a willing helper but the answer to prayer. Part of our Advent journey is to ask how we can be used by God. Where do we need to say yes so the love of God, the comfort of God, and the compassion of God can happen in another's life? Where do we need to let another help us so that we can feel those same gifts. It is really an awesome thing to think about.

In our last congregation I soon got to know Leonard. Leonard was a man in his 80's who had spent much of the past ten years on the streets, mostly because of mental health issues. Leonard was brilliant and could talk philosophy and religion with any professor I had. Leonard also had a violent temper and had been barred from most of the churches in Bellingham for his outburst. There was a study group that met on Thursdays and they decided that God had asked them to take Leonard on as a special project. They let me know about him and helped me to come up with strategies to create safe boundaries for others when Leonard was angry without chasing him away. Over time they worked with Leonard to get him into housing. They visited him when he was in the hospital and the psychiatric unit. They picked him up for their study group each week even when they knew his presence was a disruption. Over a period of about five years we all noticed a change in Leonard. His outbursts became less. He became less challenging and more helpful. He looked forward, eventually, to coming to the group and it was with sadness that his health failed and he no longer could come to church or the group. I was impressed with the group reaching out to Leonard but they all talked about how he had been a blessing to them. He had asked good questions that made them think, they had learned patience in dealing with him. They saw in him a way that they had grown in faith by having to live what Jesus taught about love and forgiveness instead of just reading about it. One of the men said, "Leonard made me a better Christian."

This is the way God works in our lives and others. We are needed and, when we are allowed to be used, good things happen.