

LET GOD FINISH

Sermon, December 12, 2021

Text: Luke 1:26-56

Elizabeth and Mary are the two newly-expectant mothers of the Christmas story. Now, they were quite a pair! Elizabeth was not a young woman. After years and years of praying for a child, after becoming used to not having a child, and after getting to the age where giving birth to a child might not be a good idea, she conceives. God literally begins a new creation within her. Her baby will be named John, and he will prepare the way for Christ. By contrast, Mary was a very young woman. She, too, hoped for a child someday, when it would be appropriate ... but not now. Not before she was married. Not while she was still a virgin. But God begins a new creation within her, as well. GOD'S TIMING IS NOT ALWAYS OUR TIMING; GOD'S WAYS ARE NOT ALWAYS OUR WAYS. Sometimes, as with Elizabeth, God seems to move too slowly. Sometimes, as with Mary, God seems to move too quickly. So we meet two expectant woman; one too old to be a mother and the other too young. But both are firmly, fully in the hands of God. Some here in worship today may see yourselves in Elizabeth. You have been praying for a long time for something to happen. You may be beginning to think that it may never happen. Obviously you can't make it happen, because if you could have, you would have. You are not in control. Some of you in worship today may see yourselves in Mary. You find your life has been disrupted. Something has been conceived in your life that you really didn't ask for. You may be frightened, confused, and, clearly, you are not in control, either.

Mary was just an ordinary young Jewish woman, with ordinary dreams that included her modest wedding to the young carpenter Joseph. She didn't expect to be visited by an angel. At first, she was perplexed by his announcement that she was favored. To be "favored by God" in the grammatical context of this passage doesn't necessarily mean that Mary is somehow "a favorite" of the Heavenly Father. Rather, the context is the favored one is the one who is about to *receive* a favor; thus Mary is "a favored one" because God is about to do her a favor. As she is about to find out, some favor!

Now, when you are accustomed to being ordinary, the last thing you expect is to hear an angel telling you that God is about to do you a favor. Like Mary, you would have to wonder about this. These words signal the beginning of something big about to happen, a mysterious intrusion and/or disruption that will take place, something out of the ordinary. And it certainly is. *"And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus."* And Mary said, *"How can this be, since I am a virgin?"* I can imagine her unspoken words, *"This is what it means to receive a favor from God?!"* An ordinary woman whose only hope is to have an ordinary wedding with her ordinary fiancé hears she is about to have a baby? Does she rejoice and say, *"Yes! The other women will shun me and spread rumors about me; Joseph will certainly refuse to marry me; and, according to the law, I could possibly get stoned for this. But if God wants to just wreck my life, I'll call myself 'Blessed.'"* No, that's not what she says. At this point she has just realized that her life is about to be really disrupted, and she exclaims, *"How can this be?" ("How will it be?")*

HOW CAN THIS BE? Have you ever said that? I know I have. Your life is suddenly disrupted. A huge change is forced upon you; someone you love, your family, your health, your job. It's the kind of thing that makes you lie awake at night as you stare at the ceiling asking, like Mary, *"How can this be?"* *How will it be? What's going to happen?"* Your life has been disrupted. Things are not what you were hoping for. Just maybe God has intervened, pushing aside the ordinary to conceive something mysterious in and through your life. You can't manage it. You can't even understand it. All you can do is receive it. Because if God did conceive it, then it really is a holy favor ... and whether you realize it or not, it just might bring salvation to you and others, if you simply accept it, and let God finish what He started.

Let God finish. It might even be said that the essence of genuine faith is the ability to wait, to cooperate with God and allow God to finish what He has started. Too often we are impatient ... we want to hurry whatever it is along ... we want to take control of the process and finish things up the way we think they should finish up. It's like how many people carry on a conversation! *(Bear with me here!)* Waiting is one of the most important elements in conversation. Genuine conversation ... *which includes allowing the other person to finish what he has started ...* is something of a lost art that needs to be recovered. Conversation is like a game of catch ... someone tosses you a comment, and you don't "drop the ball", and you don't "hold onto the ball;" you "catch" it and respond by "throwing" something back, and so on. Conversation should not be like a smash-mouth volleyball game, jumping in to smash the "ball" right back at someone, like so often happens in the "conversations" on political talk shows on TV, with people constantly interrupting each other. Let them finish!

It wasn't until about twenty or so years ago that I became aware of how often I interrupted others and/or finished their sentences, and began to see just how off putting this habit was! *(Maybe it was because I was widowed and HAD to carry on a lot more conversations than I had before; my wife was a most engaging conversationalist).* How often do you hurry

someone along, interrupt someone, or finish his sentence for him? After all, you think you know what the person wants to say. You know how this conversation should go. Hurry up ... get to the point! This very human tendency is probably the root cause of many misunderstandings, because if there's one thing almost everyone resents, it's someone who doesn't listen to what they are saying and won't let them finish. We're *not* really listening; too often we're simply waiting for an opening to more fully express *our* points, *our* ideas, *our* opinions. When we do this, not only are we being rudely dismissive of the other, we are robbing ourselves of opportunities to learn from and appreciate the other, and most importantly to learn what God may want us to learn through others.

Once I began noticing myself interrupting, I began catching myself. I would remind myself before a conversation began to be patient and wait, silently telling myself to allow the other person to finish speaking before I take my turn. I don't always manage it, and it does take discipline, and yes, sometimes the person never finishes, kind of like a plane circling, circling, circling TF Green and never landing! Sometimes the person may take the conversation someplace you don't want to go, and we don't like to relinquish control; it's easier to interrupt and take over. But I noticed how much more relaxed I felt when I stopped interrupting others. If your experience is like mine, you'll be pleasantly amazed at the softer reactions and even looks of surprise as you let others completely finish their thought before you begin yours. You will sense a much calmer, less rushed feeling. Conversations become something to savor and enjoy, rather than something to be rushed through so you can make your point.

Maybe some of you are in a "conversation" with God this morning, and you want to impatiently jump in and take over this conversation, perhaps even tell Him what to do. Again, I encourage you ... let God finish. When the angel finishes speaking, Mary ends the conversation with the greatest declaration of faith: *"Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to Your word."* She embraces the disruption as a favor from God, an example of what we all can do with all life's disruptions ... choose to receive and embrace them as potential favors from God. But we can only do that if we are convinced God is involved. I have spent enough time in emergency rooms, court rooms and funeral homes to know the human spirit can withstand just about anything, as long as we believe God is in control.

Just to be clear, not every disruption in life is conceived by God. If your friends or loved ones are undergoing disruptive upheavals in life, do not be too quick to say this is from the hand of God. You don't know that. But what we do know is that no disruption is greater than our God, and He can conceive hope in the midst of every disruption. I encourage all of us to choose to see life as an unfolding drama of which God is the author, and God never writes boring dramas. At this point Mary has no idea where this disruption of her life will lead. She knows little about what this Child will become, that He will both break her heart and save her soul. At this point she doesn't even see how giving birth, when she is not even married, could possibly be good news. All she knows is that God is in the midst of it all. And that is enough for her to say, *"Let it be to me according to your will."* You might say she allowed God to have the Final Word ... as John might express it, the Word Who became flesh, and dwelt among us ... and we have seen His glory.

It is a nice touch that after discovering she would give birth to the Messiah, the first person Mary went to, with haste, was not to Joseph or her parents but to Elizabeth ... Elizabeth, whose life has also been blessed and disrupted with an unusual pregnancy. That's who Mary wanted to see. I've mentioned this before, but this is the very first church service - The first community of believers brought together by the presence of Christ was these two expectant women, who came together for mutual encouragement, support, nurture, companionship because of a divine (*albeit disruptive*) experience they held in common. The community of believers still comes together for mutual encouragement, support, nurture and companionship. We come together to encourage and support and pray for each other as things happen in our lives, at-times disruptive things beyond our control, and to discern the life-creating, saving activity of God in it all. We come together to re-ignite our joy. And our hope ... in fact, the grand joyful hope of the Christian faith, the promise of Advent ... is that God will indeed finish what He has started.

One more point, and I close with this: When Elizabeth greeted Mary, we are told the child within Elizabeth leapt up within her womb. And then Elizabeth asked, *"Why has this happened to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me?"* The "Why" question is never really answered. Why me? Why you? Why anyone? We are a people who want to make sense of our lives, to find cause and effect explanations for why life turns out the way it does. But the explanations are not always there; not yet, anyway. As with most of our "why" questions, Elizabeth receives no straight answer. Instead, her "why" question simply evaporates as the joy within her leaps up to be so near the coming Christ Child.

Why me? Why you? Why has God chosen to present you or any of us with a gift that is creatively disruptive? It is not a bad question, but it is not exactly the right one either. The only pressing question is: will we receive and embrace this disruption, whatever it may be, as a divine favor? Will we let God finish what He has started?