

So let me start by asking you to implant a question in the back of your mind. It's not a question I think you'll answer in the next twenty minutes, indeed if your answer is an easy one you might be right to be suspect of it. Here's the question: what would you do if you felt God was calling you to do something?

It's plenty easy to ignore a calling. Indeed I heard a story a number of years ago where a young woman entered a monastic order and became a nun. Frankly, that is one of those things where I believe you *must* be called to it in order to do it. I've spent some time on the island of Iona, which has a sort of quasi-monastic rhythm to its community life and I am here to tell you I am not cut out for monasticism. I had a hard time making it to worship every morning at 8. I'm not particularly optimistic about my capacity for getting up for matins at 5. It's just not going to happen. But this young woman did feel a calling to a monastic order. If I remember the story correctly, she broke up with a fiancé in order to pursue her calling. Years later she ran into him on the subway in New York. She told a friend, "It was as if it had just happened all over again. I went home cried for a day."

Her friend replied, "Well if you loved him, why did you become a nun?"

Her answer, "I was called to be a nun."

Indeed it is easy sometimes to ignore a calling but the powerful stories, the witness of faith rarely comes from the calling ignored, but rather the calling that is lived.

I found myself pondering this as I reread Mary's story this week.

There are so many artistic renderings of beatific madonnas that I wonder sometimes if the terror of it really strikes us.

I'm not talking purely about the angelic visitor. I'm sure Gabriel is a very nice angel but I've already told you that it is my estimation that in a modern context, I'm pretty sure any angelic visitors would be facing the prospect of gun violence. No, I'm thinking more about the content of the message. What a terrifying prospect.

Unwed. Engaged. Pregnant.

I love all of the euphemisms that the older translations came up with to avoid saying the word pregnant in church. "Great with child" comes to mind.

It's a purely unscientific view that I hold, but I suspect some of the rather beautiful language that poetic renderings of the nativity have used through the years have arisen as a means of avoiding the word "pregnant" because it is associated with you-know-what.

Let's just consider that a second... pregnancy would have been just associated with you-know-what then as it is now. People have long since figured out what causes it.

Engaged. Pregnant. Problem.

Just imagine the start of that conversation.

"Joseph, I'm pregnant, but don't worry, he's 'conceived by the Holy Ghost.'"

The Bible doesn't really give us any indication that Gabriel was asking a question, but Luke does record Mary's response: "here am I."

It would be more of a midrash than a sermon were I to try to describe Mary's feelings from the first-person – and I've never been an unwed pregnant teenager. But I don't think it is too much of a stretch to say I bet she was terrified.

How could she not be? Tradition paints Joseph as a kindly man, but the divorce laws of those days were heavily weighted toward the man. One word and Joseph could have kept her dowry and kicked her to the curb.

Except that kicking her to the curb could have involved public stoning. Indeed in Matthew's version of the story, we learn that Joseph determined not to do that. He decided he would break the engagement quietly to spare her. Of course he doesn't. He doesn't and we know how it turns out.

But then, right then, how could it be other than terrifying?

Indeed, I've often wondered why Mary "set out in haste" for the hill country, as the Bible tells us. I've always thought that she was just following the age-old tradition of young women in a certain fix of going to stay with an elderly relative for a few months before they started to show.

Only after I considered the whole story was it clear that she fled town to let this whole mess cool off for a while in order to save her skin.

It is only because we have Matthew's parallel version of the story that we know that Joseph heard his calling from God to be Mary's husband. In Luke, we move abruptly from the annunciation to Mary to her getting out of town in haste. And almost as abruptly we read that the whole world is to be taxed and suddenly Joseph and Mary are back together, headed down the Bethlehem road to the innkeeper and the stable and the shepherds.

It all moves very fast to me. And it couldn't have been easy. But before we get there, before we move on from Mary's precarious fix, we have this little interlude. We call it the *magnificat*. It has been immortalized in the pages of Scripture and in music and paint and poetry.

The *magnificat* tells us what sort of God Mary knew. Listen to a few phrases again. (I'll use the KJV for effect.)

*My soul doth magnify the Lord and my spirit hath rejoiced in God my savior, for he hath regarded the low estate of his handmaiden."*

How wonderful is that? She's facing a single pregnancy, she is on the lam, more or less, at her cousin's house and she's singing about how God has noticed her low degree?

That's some faith, if you ask me. I wouldn't have wanted this calling. That's some faith.

She goes on:

*For he that is mighty has done for me great things; and holy is his name. And his mercy is on them that fear him from generation to generation. He hath shewed strength with his arm; he hath scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts. He hath put down the mighty from their seats and exalted them of low degree. He hath filled the hungry with good things and the rich he hath sent empty away.*

Now wait just a second. Setting aside the beauty of the King James, might that not be just a little hard for us to hear?

Mary's view of God is one where the rich are sent empty away? I find that a bit hard to stomach myself, particularly in view that if Mary gets her way, my stomach's going to be empty. So might yours.

I don't think of myself as a rich man. I have all that I need and more than I'm worth, as a good friend of mine likes to say about money. But I don't think of myself as rich. I suspect many of you feel the same way. But here's the problem: compared with Mary, a young woman, a peasant, a *nobody* in a terrible fix, we're loaded.

And Mary is making a statement about what she believes about God. And what's worse, it's a Biblical statement.

Mary's words are ripped straight from the lips of Hannah in the Old Testament. Who is Hannah? She is the mother of the prophet Samuel. Barren and bereft, she prayed to God to hear her cries and deliver her from her childlessness.

Children are important in every age, but for a woman in the ancient near east, they were social security. They were the old age pension. When a woman and her husband became too old to work, their oldest son would take over their household and keep them in their old age. When her husband died, it would be her son and his wives who would look after their aged mother. To be barren in the Old Testament was to be a woman whose hope was drying up fast.

So when Mary sings her song about God, she is channeling another woman in a terrible fix and she is saying that the God she worships, the God whose will she is embracing is a God who *does something about it*.

You know what *it* is. *It* is whatever you need God to do something about. Mary is singing about a God who redeems bad things. She's singing about a God who doesn't leave injustice running rampant. Mary's view of God is that God is on the side of the ones who need God most.

That sounds a lot like what theologians call *Liberation Theology*. I won't go into much detail but the basic idea is that God is on the side of the marginalized, the poor, and the oppressed. Some folks summarize it that "God exercises a preferential option for the poor."

This doesn't mean that God likes the poor more. It doesn't mean that God loves the rich less. It does mean that God's redemptive activity is aimed where it is most needed.

I struggled with this concept for some time, I confess. It perplexed me because I tended to think of God's love as a zero sum game. In order to say that God gives more love to those who need it most, it has to come from somewhere else.

And that's just not who God is. There's no zero sum with God.

In fact, I love the way that I once heard Dr. James Forbes put it. Dr. Forbes put it something like this: suppose you are a parent. You have two children. One of them is bright, successful, self-assured. She's "most likely to succeed". And then your second child struggles terribly. He's bullied, he's mistreated, he's despised. What parent, Forbes concluded, *wouldn't* channel all her energy into making that child's life better? He said, "I love to think of a great big mama God up there, loving us all but putting that love where it is absolutely most needed."

Listening to Mary, it seems like that's the God she knew.

A woman on the edge of the society, in danger, marginalized, not sure how it was all to play out went back to her faith, back to the songs of her ancestors and pulled this prayer out the lips of another woman to praise the God she knew.

It's a prayer with a biblical base. However you cut it, God is agitating on the side of those who need God the most all through the Old Testament: widows, orphans, outsiders. Basically, anyone who can't help themselves. And when Jesus shows up, he spends his time among the sinners and the suspect.

When God gets angry at the ancient Israelites, there are a handful of infractions that crop up. Earlier on in their history, it's idolatry. But the later it gets, the closer we come to the time of Christ, it seems the more God is angry at the people of Israel for forgetting the poor in their midst, for running roughshod over those the least able to defend themselves.

Mary's song shows us the sort of God that we know.

God is deeply concerned with those of low estate. We don't have to be, but we can't claim to be on God's side if we are. It's that simple. The Bible is full of it.

In our current culture of hyper-partisanship, I hope that we can see past the nastiness of some of the back and forth to see that at the end of the day, God has clearly stated where God's sympathies lie.

And I want to be very clear that I make this statement not to infuse political overtones into our worship, but to infuse theological overtones. If we read the Bible, this is the God we get.

I'm reminded of a classic moment that happened between secretary of state Henry Kissinger and the Reverend William Sloane Coffin. The discussion was undoubtedly something political and I'm sure they were on opposite sides as they generally were. Coffin continued haranguing the secretary until he finally snapped at him, "Bill, what would you have me do?"

Coffin paused a moment and replied, "Mr. Secretary. I am a Christian minister. It is my job to call for justice to roll down like waters, righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. It is your job to figure out the irrigation system!"

I have absolutely no idea what the proper irrigation system is to assure that we are flooding the love of God that we have experienced into the world so that it reaches the places where it absolutely most needs to go. But I do know that is our calling. That's the God we worship.

That's the God we worship with what we say and with what we do. We made Alex a promise today. We said we'd walk with him and show him what it means to follow Jesus

Christ. For all of us on each side of the aisle and for those who don't even like the aisle, I suspect that is an uneasy place to be, to know that we are called, *called by God*, to work for justice and mercy, to seek to see the lowly elevated.

If we look back to the Bible, to Mary and to Hannah, and to all the other voices who said, "here am I," this is the God they knew.

But more importantly, if we look to Jesus, if we look to all he said and did and taught us to do, we see God. If we look to Jesus who acknowledged the poor would always be with us, we see God. We see God's answer to the pain and brokenness of the world. Even as we look to the baby in the manger, we know that there is a Christ on the cross. And it is in that cross that God says to us, "Here am I."

So, that question: if God was calling you to do something, what would you do about it?

In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.