



**Advent 4, Year B – December 18, 2011**

Luke 1.26-38

**A Homily preached by the Rev'd Tara Livingston**

Greetings favoured one, God is with you.

Mary, you are favoured by God. Mary, a young Jewish girl on the verge of womanhood was living a typical life. She would have been learning domestic chores under the watchful eye of her mother, preparing herself for her impending marriage to her fiancé Joseph. I imagine her fetching water from the common well to take the common cistern in the courtyard which her family would have shared with four other families. I think of her grinding the grain to make the bread and perhaps even preparing some fish for an evening meal. Mary, I imagine, was doing what all young women did in 1<sup>st</sup> century Israel and that was living an extraordinarily ordinary life.

And then out of the blue, Gabriel appears and says, Mary you are favoured by God and you will be blessed.

Now that would most certainly turn an ordinary day into something extraordinary. And for some of us gathered here this morning, this is an unbelievable set of circumstances to say the least.

Marcus Borg once said I don't know if it really happened this way or not, but I know it to be true. I know this to be true. I know that God spoke to Mary.

The scripture states that Mary was perplexed. I daresay that this is an understatement. One minute she was happily sweeping the floor or grinding grain and the next she is told that she, one young girl out of those throughout the entire world, has been chosen to conceive by the Holy Spirit and give birth. And she will give birth not just to a child but the very Son of God. The word perplexed cannot do justice to Mary's experience of shock, of disbelief, of fright and of confusion. Mary, above every other woman, has been told by an angel just how God intends to work in her life. Mary knows in no uncertain terms that God is with her.

Perhaps when we gathered here today listen to this passage we too could consider ourselves perplexed. Much ink has been spilt, many debates have been offered as to the actual meaning of the Hebrew word *almah* and whether it refers to a virgin or to simply a young woman. To debate this point today would indeed be to miss the point. The point is, whether or not we believe that an angel appeared to Mary to notify her of this impending virgin birth, the point is whether or not we believe that God continues to work in the world today just as God did back in the good old days.

I don't know if it really happened this way or not, but I know it to be true.

Some 1600 years ago in 367 Athanasius, Bishop of Alexandria, wrote a letter which essentially closed the canon. In consultation with one another the Church fathers declared which texts would be considered Holy Scriptures and which would not and indicated that nothing more could be added. The effect of this declaration; unintended I hope, was that over the years people came to believe that since no more good news stories could be written that perhaps no more good news stories could be lived. The unintended side effect was to relegate God's involvement in the world to a past event, something that happened back then, in the past, but, alas, happens no more.

For us here gathered this morning this leads us to ask the question, is God still active in the world? Is God, through the Holy Spirit and God's own Son, still engaged in what happens here on earth? Just because we are no longer adding to the scriptures does that mean that God is no longer working with us? Could we believe, would we believe, that as any of us are engaged in our day to day lives, that an angel could appear to us and change not only our lives but the lives of those around us?

Listen.

Greetings favoured one. The Lord is with you. Do not be afraid Matthew, or Patrick, or Helen, or Henry, or Joni, or Michael, or Margie, or Shirley or

Christopher....insert your own name here.... do not be afraid for you have found favour with God and God has big plans for you.

Just sit with that for a moment.

What is that like for you, to imagine that God is speaking to you, just as God spoke through the angel Gabriel all of those years ago? Is it new? Is the thought of God being in contact with you, ordinary as you are, just beyond your capacity to imagine?

Perhaps you have heard the bible referred to as a living document. Because it is alive, because it brings the past into the present and does not only speak of stale, historical facts, we must believe that the work started in it continues today. We must believe that when they declared the canon closed and the Holy Scriptures complete they did not declare an end to God's engagement with humanity. God's interaction with us did not end just because we no longer write them down and declare them holy.

At a meeting this past week each person shared a reflection on where they had seen God working in the world, or where God needed to be working in the world and the lives of those around us. While the examples shared might not have been noteworthy; may not have been deemed grand enough to be written down for posterity or re-enacted at some future pageant, it was certainly evidence that God indeed continues to work in the world. Small things, some found in nature, some in worship, some in family, some in strangers but we were, each of us, witnesses to God's presence in the world. I am confident that God continues to work in the world in the same ways as in the scriptures we read – even though we no longer write down the accounts and bind them in a book.

I don't know if it really happened this way or not, but I know it to be true. I know that God spoke through Gabriel to Mary all of those years ago and I know that God, today, speaks to each of us.

Greetings favoured one. I am still walking with you and working through you.  
And for that, thanks be to God.