

II SAMUEL 7:1-3

Now when King David had settled in his house and the Lord had given him rest from all his enemies around him, the king said to the prophet Nathan, "See now, I am living in a house of cedar, but the ark of God stays in a tent." Nathan said to the king, "Go, do all that you have in mind, for the Lord is with you."

But that same night the word of the Lord came to Nathan: Go and tell my servant David: Thus, says the Lord: "Are you the one to build me a house to live in?"

PSALM 89:1-4

I will sing of your steadfast love, O Lord, forever; with my mouth I will proclaim your faithfulness to all generations. I declare that your steadfast love is established forever; your faithfulness is as firm as the heavens.

You said, "I have made a covenant with my chosen one, I have sworn to my servant David: I will establish your descendants forever, and build your throne for all generations."

LUKE 1:26-38

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a young woman engaged to a man by the name of Joseph, of the house of _David. The young woman's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." But Mary was much perplexed by his words and wondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High, and God will give to him the throne of his ancestor, David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."

Mary said to the angel, “How can this be since I am a virgin?” The angel said to her, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. Therefore, the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God.”

Then Mary said, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” Then the angel departed from her.

TEST OF COURAGE

I Samuel 1:1-3
Psalm 89:1-5
Luke 1:26-38

C.S. Lewis wrote, “Courage is not simply one of the virtues, but the form of every virtue at the testing point.” And in our scriptures for this morning, we read of two individuals who lived in different centuries; in vastly different historical contexts; from divergent socio-economic spectrums; of opposite genders; and challenged to very disparate tasks; but who would be brought by God to the “testing point” of which Lewis spoke.

What else besides their relationship to Jesus—Mary his mother and David his great, great, great something, uncle or grandfather—did they share? Well, for sure they both got the headlines in our lectionary for this final Sunday in Advent. And in order to earn those headlines, they shared the honor (if you want to call it that) of being selected by God for a special task. An honor in name only, perhaps, for God tends to request a lot from those whom God favors. The faint of heart need not wish for God’s patronage!

But beyond that, what characteristics does God look for? You would have to strain to find two people with less in common than David and Mary. Parenthetically, let us remember that before David was anointed by God as the second king of Israel following the disastrous reign of Saul, he was a simple shepherd. But overnight, he became one of the most powerful

men in the ancient Middle East. He had an army at his disposal whom he personally led in battle; he had slaves to meet his every need; concubines if he wanted them; tremendous wealth and the admiration of his entire nation. His popularity was unparalleled. He sat at the pinnacle of the world.

And then there was Mary. What station in life did she hold? Well, she wasn't a slave—that much we can say with certainty. And we might also surmise that she came from a middle-class family. For let us remember that she married Joseph who must have apprenticed with his father as a carpenter which was a respected and likely lucrative occupation which says something about Mary's background as well. For Jewish marriages were often arranged by a paid matchmaker. It was all about preserving wealth—the rich married rich and the poor remained within their own orbits. It would be unusual for someone to marry either much over or under their heads.

All of which is to say that Mary and Joseph had probably only met a couple of times and scarcely knew each other. And as regards Mary herself, she was merely an adolescent Jewish maiden who really could have no higher expectations of life than to bear children, hopefully beginning with a male heir (I guess God solved that problem) and to live in the shadow of her husband. She would have had no education or civil rights whatsoever.

What we can glean from this is that God will choose whom God will choose—from a king to an adolescent maiden. And God needs different people. God needs leaders like David who can alter the tide of history and who can create ethical and moral changes to the world; and God needs people like Mary who can bear children, change diapers, sew clothes, cook and wash dishes. God has dreams for the world which require the service of multitudes of people from backgrounds as diverse as the entire spectrum of humanity. God smirks at the status humans have imposed upon each other. God wants people with courage. Because to carry out the tasks for which God summons us require us to reach deep within ourselves. Having God's favor is not getting a medal to wear on our chests, it is tantamount to receiving a work permit.

David and Mary both had choices to make. Yahweh asked David if he was the one to build him a house. There is a play on words here because “house” has two meanings. The first refers to a physical building—in this case a temple--which David wanted to construct for the Lord. If you read the entire lectionary passage (which I shortened over concerns of length), Yahweh was less interested in having a temple for himself than he was in establishing a dynasty (the other meaning for the word “house”). For Yahweh was concerned with future leadership and had found favor with the House of David to continue producing it for the security and growth of Israel. “Are you the one? Can I trust you to faithfully obey my commands and set an example for all who come after you? Will you accept this responsibility?” It was an enormous commitment and for Advent purposes, the connecting point between David and Joseph, who was of the House and lineage of David.

Which brings us back to Mary who suddenly found her own favor with God who called upon her to play a rather important supporting role in the succession of the Davidic dynasty. There is obviously a lot of legend and myth blended together around Mary. While virgin births were ascribed to any number of legendary heroes in those days, it is totally unnecessary and perhaps even a distraction in the anointing of Jesus as the Messiah. What is necessary is to understand that Jesus himself—who also found favor with God which eventually led to the cross—was a human being like the rest of us who had choices to make every step of the way—the most profound being in Gethsemane when he had to decide whether to complete his mission...or not.

Mary was pregnant. How she got that way I suppose will always be a matter of speculation. But to get caught up on that question is really to miss the point. Every Jewish mother had a dream that she would give birth to the coming Messiah. And so, Mary had a challenge before her as a young mother of a Jewish son who was of the House of David which itself was significant to an oppressed nation who was waiting for a messiah to free them from Roman rule. Will he be the one? What sort of guidance, nurture and education would he

require if he might possibly fulfill that role? Would Mary be up to the task? While Jesus was obviously her first born, he would also have at least one sibling (James) and likely others who are never mentioned. Could she successfully give Jesus what he would need in case he was the One?

Once again, it was all about courage. We know little to nothing about Jesus' life before he appeared to be baptized by John. But how in the world did a young man in his late twenties or early thirties acquire the wisdom and profound faith and ability to see into the hearts of the people he encountered and to heal the sick? He had a dream, did he not, of bringing forth the kingdom of God within all of us. Surely God found favor with him, but Mary must have played an enormous role in preparing him for that task.

How do you know that God has not found favor with you? What role might you be called to play? Never dismiss yourself from the possibility. We are all needed. What is your dream? Do you have the courage to answer the call?

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