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12/21/2014, Advent 4B  
2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16, Luke 1:26-38

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

<sup>38</sup>And Mary said, “Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.” (Luke 1:38, RSV)

Mary’s answer here is the best in the Bible! So says one of the commentators<sup>1</sup> on this morning’s Gospel, and I do believe he is right. Some saints of the Bible hesitate when the Lord calls them to special ministry. Moses, for example, claims that he is not up to the task of leading Israel because he is not a good talker:

<sup>10</sup>But Moses said to the LORD, “Oh, my Lord, I am not eloquent, either heretofore or since thou hast spoken to thy servant; but I am slow of speech and of tongue.” (Exodus 4:10, RSV)

Jeremiah protests that he is too young:

<sup>6</sup>Then I said, “Ah, Lord GOD! Behold, I do not know how to speak, for I am only a youth.” (Jeremiah 1:6, RSV)

And Jonah heads for the hills when the Lord instructs him to preach to Nineveh:

<sup>1</sup>Now the word of the LORD came unto Jonah the son of Amittai, saying, <sup>2</sup>Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry against it; for their wickedness is come up before me. <sup>3</sup>But Jonah rose up to flee unto Tarshish from the presence of the LORD... (Jonah 1:1-3, KJV)

In the New Testament, we have those wonderful stories of the call of the disciples. Jesus summons the fisherman to follow him, and straightway they do:

<sup>19</sup>And he saith unto them, Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men. <sup>20</sup>And they straightway left their nets, and followed him. (Matthew 4:19-20, KJV)

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<sup>1</sup> Brent A. Strawn, *The Lectionary Commentary: The Gospel Lessons*, page 290.

They follow Jesus, but they do so silently. We hear no answer from them to Jesus. They simply get up and go, leaving their fishing nets behind. This is a tremendous thing, hard to understand in those ancient times when fishermen tended to do as their fathers and grandfathers had done before them. Still, Peter and Andrew, James and John might have been intrigued by the words of Jesus:

<sup>19</sup>And he saith unto them, Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men. (Matthew 4:19, KJV)

That phrase – fishers of humanity – might have been justification enough for those early disciples. No more are they to be fishers of fish, but of people. It was a wonderful adventure they were being drawn into, but not an incomprehensible one. But with Mary, it was not so. Her call includes mystery, even scandal by all ordinary reckoning.

The closest parallel to the call of Mary is probably the call of the prophet Isaiah. At first glance, Isaiah is like Mary in giving immediate assent to the call of the Lord:

Also I heard the voice of the Lord, saying, Whom shall I send, and who will go for us? Then said I, Here am I; send me. (Isaiah 6:8, KJV)

But the thing about Isaiah is that when he learns the nature of his ministry, then he seems to hesitate. Or at least he poses a question:

<sup>10</sup>Make the heart of this people fat [says the LORD], and make their ears heavy, and shut their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart, and convert, and be healed.

<sup>11</sup>Then said I, Lord, how long? (Isa 6:10-11, KJV)

Maybe Israel's traditional lament has sprung to Isaiah's lips, "How long?" as in Psalm 13:

*How long* wilt thou forget me, O LORD? for ever? how long wilt thou hide thy face from me? (Psalm 13:1, KJV)

And if his words be not a lament, but simply a request for information, still they differ from Mary, for that young woman gives her consent to the call of God, with no qualifications, no questions about this matter of the Holy Spirit coming upon her, though her consent means the absolute turning upside down of her life:

<sup>38</sup>And Mary said, "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word." (Luke 1:38, RSV)

Mary knows what she is getting herself in for. She knows that she is opening herself up to an impossibility, as the world measures things, and to a scandal threatening her marriage to Joseph. But she gives her consent anyway.

Arthur Carl Piepkorn — that great teacher of Lutheranism — says that Mary’s consent “was a decision on behalf of all humanity.<sup>2</sup>” She was being invited to share in the birth of Israel’s Messiah. More than that, she was being invited to share in the birth of One “of his kingdom there will be no end” (Luke 1:33). She is being invited to share in the birth of One who is to be conceived not of her husband, but of God, indeed of the Holy Spirit:

<sup>35</sup>And 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 called holy, the Son of God.” (Luke 1:35, RSV)

Such a child is cause of hope, not only for Israel, but for all of humanity. And when God wanted to do this important thing, he turned to a woman. He waited for her answer. All of humanity waited for her answer. And that young woman gave her consent. God bless her! We all have reason to be grateful to Mary and proud of her.

## DO WHATEVER HE TELLS YOU

Here in America, a fascinating statement about Mary has been published by a group called “Evangelicals and Catholics Together.” The statement came out in 2009, about five years ago, and it is called *Do Whatever He Tells You: The Blessed Virgin Mary in Christian Faith and Life*.<sup>3</sup>

In the introduction to the statement, the writers note a modern drift among Catholics and Evangelicals toward one another and toward each other’s concerns about Mary:

In our time there is among Evangelicals a renewed interest in Mary, and among Catholics a determination to make clear that the greatness of Mary is in her faithfulness to Jesus Christ, her Lord and ours.

In the part of the statement about where Catholics and Evangelicals agree, there is a lovely sentence I would like to lift up for you. It is about Mary taking

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<sup>2</sup> Arthur Carl Piepkorn, *The Church: Selected Writings of Arthur Carl Piepkorn*, page 272.

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.firstthings.com/article/2009/10/do-whatever-he-tells-you-the-blessed-virgin-mary-in-christian-faith-and-life>

care of Jesus, as mothers around the world care for their little ones. The sentence goes this way:

We picture her [Mary] nursing him at her breast, teaching him his first words, kissing his bruises when he fell, introducing him to Israel's understanding of the ways of the Lord—the mother who helped him memorize the psalms and say his prayers, even as he grew in wisdom and stature and in favor with God and man (Luke 2:52).

You will recall about Jesus, I am quite sure, that from time to time, he would retreat to a “lonely place apart.” He would withdraw from the multitudes and spend the night in prayer. St. Luke, for example, speaks of Jesus going to a mountain and spending the night in prayer:

And it came to pass in those days, that he went out into a mountain to pray, and continued all night in prayer to God. (Luke 6:12, KJV)

It is fascinating to think that he first learned his prayers from his mother and father, as many a child does. And the Statement on Mary might be right that she taught him the Psalms, so that even when he was dying it was natural that a Psalm came to his lips — Psalm 22 which begins in sorrow and ends in triumph:

My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me. (Psalm 22:1, KJV)

There are mysteries here — of course, there are! It is wonderful, for example, to think that the Spirit by which David and other Psalmists were inspired was the Spirit of this Child, carried in Mary's arms as a baby and crucified on a cross as a young man.

However that might be, still it is the case that Jesus grew up well —

And the child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him. (Luke 2:40, RSV)

— and surely Mary deserves some credit for that. I mean, *real* babies and children are blessed if they have good mothers and fathers. Jesus was a real baby and a real child, and he seems to have been blessed to have had Mary for his mother. I bet she did indeed kiss his bruises when he fell, arranged birthday parties for him along with cake and candles, gave him encouragement when he was a teenager if he should feel lonely or misunderstood by other boys and girls of his generation. And above all, it is nice to think that Mary taught her Son to grow up devout, for look how he turned out! He turned out entirely committed to the God of Israel.

And then the Statement on Mary makes that fascinating and ancient shift from Mary as the *mother* of Jesus to Mary as a *worshiper* of her Son. It must have happened somewhere along the way. She knew from the beginning, from this Sunday's annunciation story, that she was mother to a holy child. The angel Gabriel revealed this to her, and she kept all these things, "pondering them in her heart" (Luke 2:19, RSV). And so life worked out for this woman — so full of heavenly thoughts — that one day, when she prayed, she joined others in praying "in the name of Jesus. Amen" — that is, in the name of her Son. The Statement on Mary pictures this in the upper room after the resurrection of Jesus, when Mary joins the apostles in prayer:

When, much later, Mary is depicted as praying with the apostles (Acts 1:14), we may imagine that Mary prayed *to her son* with the words that she had taught him to pray.

In this morning's First Lesson, the famous reading from 2 Samuel 7, we have the Lord's promise of that David's throne shall be established for ever:

<sup>16</sup>And your house and your kingdom shall be made sure for ever before me; your throne shall be established for ever. (2 Samuel 7:16, RSV)

It is a royal story, speaking of kings and dynasties, and it is an oh, so masculine story, of David and Nathan and Solomon and the Messiah to come. And it is a royal story that means hopes and salvation for all who are willing.

But it is an uplifting thing to notice that this great, royal story had a role in it for a teenage woman — a village girl perhaps as young as some of our catechism students. She played her role, and in doing so, provides you and me with a beautiful example of self-surrender to the Lord:

<sup>38</sup>And Mary said, "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word." (Luke 1:38, RSV)

It is true: Mary provides us with a beautiful example of self-surrender to the Lord. But her child, the Babe of Bethlehem, grows up to give the most beautiful of all examples of total dedication to the will of the Lord. It is the divine will that you and I should be saved and have some hope in this world. And Jesus throughout his life proved himself willing to yield himself to the cause of our salvation, even though it should cause him his very life.

Let it be so with us also. If the Lord should be calling you to some form of service, some form of sacrifice, some deed of courage, some word of testimony, some definite act of love, then answer as did Mary, the Mother of our Lord, long ago: "Let it be to me according to your word" through the grace and merits of

Mary's Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom belongs the glory with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.