

Dec. 20, 2020 Advent 4B
Surprise!
Luke 1:26-38

Before we begin, I would like you to find a piece of scrap paper and write on it, "I am the Lord's servant." Just hang onto that. We will be using it in a little while.

Let's look at Mary's story today. It begins with some strange words: "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." With these words, the Angel Gabriel announces God's call to Mary. Mary is unique in all creation with the young woman from Nazareth being offered a pivotal role in the redemption of all creation. We see in Mary's faithfulness the model for the way the grace of God can and will, albeit in smaller ways, use each of us.

Look at the many ways God had already acted in scripture. God used Miriam's bravery as she kept an eye on her brother Moses, floating in a basket. She would go on to lead her people in praising God after they were brought out of Egypt. God raised up Deborah to free her people from the Canaanite king, Sisera. Esther discovered that she had been placed in King Xerxes' palace in order to rescue her people from death. The prophetess Anna saw the infant Jesus in the Temple and praised God, speaking of him to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem. An unnamed woman at a well in Samaria heard Jesus speaking and became an evangelist, bringing her village to faith. The wealthy businesswoman Lydia heard the Good News from Paul and became the first of her people to follow Jesus, using her means to support the new faith taking root in the Roman Empire.

Mary's call came through the appearance of the Angel Gabriel. Even in biblical times, hearing God speak audibly or having an angel appear with a message from God was a rare event. While her call was singular, Mary's response of "I am the Lord's servant" is part of a pattern woven into scripture. Abraham, Jacob, Moses, Samuel, and others heard God's call and responded with those words.

Isaiah was in the temple when he had a vision of God on the throne with seraphim, six-winged angels, flying around the throne, calling out, "Holy, Holy, Holy." The voice of the Lord calls to Isaiah and says, "Whom shall I

send, and who will go for us?" Isaiah responds, "Here am I; send me" (Isaiah 6:1-8).

Then we come to Mary in our Gospel reading for today. Gabriel lays out the plan for Mary, explaining how she is to be the mother of the Messiah. Mary's response is the time-tested response of those who answered God's call before her: "I am the Lord's servant."

The people of faith whose stories we named share the common attribute of making themselves available to God. God calls and they reply, "Here am I," before they even know what God has in mind for them.

In this, Mary is part of an ongoing pattern: God's plan always involves using ordinary people to bring about extraordinary changes.

Mary's call to be the Theotokos—the God-bearer—was unlike any other in all creation, with the exception of the fact that God calls and uses ordinary and flawed me and ordinary and flawed you, fitting the pattern we see working its way through human history. Every Christian shares a common call to use the gifts God has given us toward the reconciliation of all the world.

But how might we hear God's call? What is it like to discern how the Holy Spirit might use you? First, know that this is common. Your own life has been shaped by those who were in some ways responding to how the Holy Spirit was moving in their lives.

But how do you know when it is the Holy Spirit who is guiding you? After all, we know that God can use your own interests and desires to call you, but your own interest and desire alone are not God's call.

Second, know that a call happens in community. If you are being led toward something, test whether or not it is God calling you – with prayer, by surrounding yourself with godly people who are also praying for your discernment. Then ask God to make a way or close the way. This is not about ordained ministry, certainly not that alone. God may call you to something – a vocation, whether as a teacher or physician or real estate agent, or as a foster parent or scout leader, or even just to reach out to one person on a given day. In fact, the Holy Spirit can use you anywhere to touch the lives of those around you.

It takes some spiritual discernment, though, to determine when it is God and when it is just our own desires at play. When the Holy Spirit is really working to get your attention, God will use others to affirm what one is hearing. Ask your pastor or a trusted friend to pray about it with you. God speaks in stereo, using more than one method at once—God will use what you read, hear on television or the radio, and the passing comment of a friend. God will also use those various means to show that it is not the Holy Spirit. If I come up with a great idea, or a terrible idea I think is great, I can try to baptize my idea as God's.

Ask God to direct your path. Attend to what that might be. When something arises, test it and continue to listen. If something is of God, ask for the Holy Spirit to open doors, even though it seems impossible. And also ask God that if it is not of him, to close the doors, no matter how promising that path seems, and make it impossible, even if it had been a sure thing. It is important when discerning God's will to surround yourself with godly people and to ask them to pray as well.

Praying for God to close doors is hard. After all, the thing you are praying about may be just your own will and desires talking. Still, you should pray for the opportunity to fall through if it is not God's will.

But what if you have never experienced God calling you to do anything – ever? Fear not. Every Christian has been there. The appropriate response is still, "I am the Lord's servant." Offer your life to God and let the Holy Spirit guide you. While none of us will experience a call as world changing as the one Gabriel announced to Mary, the effect of each follower of Jesus listening and discerning how God will use them is what the Holy Spirit uses to reconcile all creation to God.

Now for that sheet of paper on which you wrote "I am the Lord's servant." I want you to put it in your pocket or your purse or your wallet and keep it there through Christmas. What surprising situation arises, remember this unchangeable truth. "I am the Lord's servant."