

“Perplexed Pondering” (23Dec18)
Luke1:26-38, 46-55

“She was much perplexed and pondered what sort of greeting this might be.”

In Luke’s Gospel, those words introduce Mary, the Mother of our Lord, the God-bearer, the premier saint. And they may be a worthwhile frame for us this morning, too. I’m a little more skeptical than Sara Hulsether that we’ll pause amid Christmas morning commotion to ponder in our hearts. By tomorrow’s Christmas Eve worship, we will probably be swept along by the emotion and beauty and tradition of it all. We won’t likely take much time to ponder or even to be aware that this is perplexing.

And so we have that opportunity, those of us gathered this morning, here on this 4th Sunday of Advent. And perplexity is a good Advent practice. Pondering, too. This season still of hope and waiting isn’t a benign or passive, but eager and engaged.

Those who have presents waiting under Christmas trees know what this is about: trying to discern what is inside each package, guessing what that shape could be, what you’ll discover when you unwrap it. That is this Advent practice of perplexed pondering. This is about being given a gift from God and trying to figure out what it means, how to unwrap it, what’s inside, what to do with this: “Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.”

In your perplexity may also be some hesitancy. You may feel unprepared to rush in, not where angels fear to tread, but maybe in their footsteps. You may take this encounter of the angel Gabriel visiting Mary and wonder about your response.

It’s a frequent question of mother Mary’s apparently eager “Yes! Let it be!” Our pondering may produce the possibility of her declining, saying no. I’ve heard preachers pose a probability that Gabriel had made multiple stops and been turned down elsewhere before finally finding a willing partner for God’s plan, making Mary favored for her favorability, for agreeing.

Or we may ask if it wasn’t an immediate affirmative, if Mary weighed the options and considered carefully before taking the leap toward this pregnant proposition. That would’ve involved deciding it was more important than all her other relationships, from family to village to fiancé Joseph, since this well could estrange those. But it probably is even prioritizing over life itself, since on the one hand we’re reminded she could’ve been executed for infringing on the patriarchal society, or even if that risk wasn’t realized, she of course faced the dangers of childbirth in a time of little health care.

But this approaches the pondering in the wrong way. Certainly we say No to God’s work in our lives and No to God’s will for our world all too frequently, much too often, with sinful abandon and selfish preference. We consider it a choice, an option to be balanced against others. This is how we regard our commitments to financial contributions and even our weekend attendance at church, as one possibility among many, and often falling further down the list.

Maybe our own reluctance and constant diversion is what makes us surprised and astonished at Mary’s saintliness, that we hem and haw and hesitate where she had her eager “Yes! Let it be!”

But for her saintliness and for yours, for any of God’s work, it’s best to remember that it’s not about our decisions and choices. This faith never really involves carefully weighing your options. This moment’s pondering isn’t for whether you should say yes.

For Mary, it’s not about logical evaluation. The clear, easy, obvious answer would be No Thanks! She would be quite essentially giving her life away—whether in the direct term or in the longer view of what it always means to parent, and what it meant to parent one whom she raised to turn the world around, to confront the powerful and cast them down from their thrones and to be sure the hungry multitudes would be filled with good things. Not long after his birth, we’ll hear that this one will cause the falling and the raising

of many, and Mary's own heart will be pierced (Luke 2:34-35).

This isn't happiness or contentment in any of our standard rosy wishlist sorts of terms that Mary is being invited into. This is sacrifice. This is love. This is God's mission.

And so, rather than our willpower, we pray for God's will to be done. Not our eagerness or energy, this comes about because God is active in her, and in you. This is how God operates, by blessing, by inspiration. It comes immediately here in the message, "You have found favor with God." God has looked favorably on me, she sings, a lowly one, not in high esteem. Not favored because of anything of proving herself, not because she would be quick to respond in the right way, not because she inherently was full of holiness. Her holiness comes because it is given to her in the speaking of this word: You are favored by God.

It is this word of blessing, the word that instills holiness, that makes saints, which creates the new possibilities in Mary, and in you. It is already in the delivery of that good news of God's favor that the Holy Spirit comes upon you, that this new possibility is conceived in you.

In much of the art tradition, this moment of announcing a birth to Mary shows the dove of the Holy Spirit flying into her ear. This spoken word is how God's new life comes to rest on and grow in you.

And it says the power of the Most High overshadows you. This is a cool phrase. The word for overshadow is used in the Old Testament when God's presence so filled the tent of the tabernacle that Moses couldn't even get in. The word is mostly in the Gospels' Transfiguration stories, as a bright cloud comes glowing around Jesus and the disciples on the mountaintop. It's a word about being brought into God's sphere of influence, about being surrounded and held by God, being covered and protected.

God was not asking Mary to make a choice and then leaving her to face the consequences. God was creating the response within her and also holding her through what was to come.

It is this awareness of God's work in her and in us that allows the song we can sing with her of being filled with gladness. Even before her child has been born, it gives her the concept to sing as if God's mission is already accomplished, an already past-tense declaration of how a kingdom coming empties the wealthy of their boasting and is sympathetic to the needy, a good news already in effect.

So this isn't meek Mary bowing her head. There's nothing mild or subdued about this young girl. In the way that our own children embodied and resonated the message for us last week, with confidence and eagerness and unique gifts, as our young people so often lead us in causes of justice and see the world as it should be, that is the faith that also energizes Mary.

With her, we sing in amazement of Advent accomplished, and we ponder this perplexity that we're not only waiting for something more, but knowing it has already come, is already here, in the miracle of God taking on flesh in her, in us, in you.

Hymn: *Unexpected and Mysterious* (ELW 258)