

**The Rev. Jennifer Adams**

**Advent 4B, 2008**

**“From Ordinary to Overshadowed all in the Visit of and Angel”**

Well, we've come a long way from the apocalyptic images of the beginning of the season – remember how on first Advent we heard about Christ coming in on the clouds and how at that time the sun would be darkened the moon would not give its light and the stars would be falling from the sky? At that point the visions of the season were cosmic and the happenings were to be visible and far-reaching, effecting the earth and the sea and the sky. They were big visions on a grand scale and the effect was to get us to sit on the edge of our seats, a bit wide eyed, looking up and around and wondering just when the stars would begin their end-time dance.

But over the course of four Sundays we've gone from that humungous scale description of the unfolding of events to one very small-scale, intimate conversation on which all the rest of it seems to turn. And there is something quite tender about that. It's just a conversation between one angel, Gabriel and one young woman, Mary. But I wonder if even the stars were exceptionally quiet at that very moment, gently holding their celestial breath, sitting on the edge of their seats, listening for the response that would change the world forever.

The conversation went like this. Gabriel spoke first, “Greetings, favored one, the Lord is with you.” And Mary was “perplexed” as any of us would be if an angel came and talked to us like that. Other translations of the Bible say she was “greatly troubled,” “confused and disturbed,” or “thoroughly shaken.” And she must have been afraid too because Gabriel was not only the first but also the second one to speak when he said, “Do not be afraid, Mary. For you have found favor with God.” Now remember that Mary was a peasant girl, not yet married, of little wealth and in the eyes of the world, far from favored. She did not really walk around with a halo around her head as we tend to picture her now and when the angel came to meet her, she was probably in the middle of some pretty, not-dramatic-at-all ordinary work – getting water or cooking or cleaning or doing something young girl-like for the family household. But before Mary could even begin to get her bearings around the greeting, wash her hands or take off her apron or set down the buckets of water, before she could even begin to respond with more than a perplexed

sort of look, Gabriel spilled the whole deal and in a matter of seconds the deal that was already big got even bigger, “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 the Lord 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.”

And then Mary spoke her one question, “How can this be?” she asked. And I love that because it’s open. It’s an open response to an awesome, frightening moment. It isn’t “are you sure you have the right person or shouldn’t we have a preliminary conversation before this one or to tell you the truth, I’m not sure I really believe in angels are you really, real?” And it’s to that open question Gabriel explained a little more even though “explanation” may not be quite the right word to put on this. He said, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, Mary, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you, and the child you will bear will be holy and will be called the Son of God.” Gabriel told Mary about her cousin Elizabeth and he closed with the statement: “For nothing is impossible with God.” One moment ordinary day. Next moment, visited, favored, overshadowed and caught up as a major player in the whole cosmic plan of salvation.

Which is maybe how it always happens. When I think of the overshadowings that have happened in my life, those things haven’t generally been listed in my planner and they aren’t ever initiated by the people or beings I’d expect them to be initiated by. Those situation always leave me perplexed or greatly troubled or confused and disturbed and I’m not always standing in front of an angel, at least the confirmation of such is not readily available at that moment. Part of the message of this story is that we don’t get to schedule when God comes and turns it all upside down or for that matter when God comes and turns it right-side-up. And some of the time we don’t even know the difference between the two, but God does. This story reminds us that our place in the radical, humungous scheme of things is not the same as God’s place. A whole lot of this – the timings – the visitations - the unexpected and radical turns of life – all of that is in God’s hands, often completely out of our control.

But the other message of this story is that God’s place is with us. God has chosen to be here. And that’s the amazing thing. And in that realization the story goes from cosmic and “way

beyond us” to right here and within and among us. And we too, like Mary have been called to respond. Had there been an ad in the paper looking for some young girl to carry God’s child to birth, to love him through his growing and his leaving home and his dying and eventual rising again, Mary probably would not have applied. But God came to her, found her, interrupted her, assured her and said “You are chosen, and here’s how it will go. And it will matter to the whole world.” And maybe, that’s always how it happens. God comes and finds and interrupts and sometimes frightens but also assures us all. And maybe the stars listen for those responses too.

So as we inch ever closer to Christmas know that the stars could fall or an angel could come. Know that in the eyes of God peasants can be powerful, young girls and boys too and that while the sun probably won’t go dark any day soon, any moment, any one of us could be found and overshadowed, interrupted by the powerful presence of our God. The good news of course is that that presence is filled with hope. Filled with love. Filled with transformation, redemption and peace. And nothing is impossible at all. So I suppose our prayer should be that like Mary, we find the courage to leave our questions open and to respond, “Here I am, Here we are God’s servants. Let it be with us, with us according to your word.”