

Liturgical Date/Readings: Fourth Sunday of Advent- Year B; 2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16; Cantic 15 from *A New Zealand Prayer Book*; Luke 1: 26-38, the Annunciation

Date: December 18, 2011

Homilist: The Rev. Alanna M. Van Antwerpen

In my life, and even in my prayer life, I've been known to write letters to people I care about in order to express my thoughts and feelings succinctly. Preparing today's sermon, this seemed the most natural way to communicate to Mary, yes that Mary, the mother of God:

Dear Mary, (also known as the Virgin Mary, the mother of God, or Theotokos in the Greek tradition meaning 'Birthgiver of God'),

By now you realize that for quite a few years I've been avoiding you. I know we were closer when I was a little girl but ever since my adolescence I've felt the distance between us growing. Well, I'm not proud to admit it but now I can no longer avoid you because you've plopped yourself right in front of me this fourth Sunday of Advent when I need to preach...one might say this is an occupational hazard I guess.

Anyway, it's strange isn't it that this distance between us began when I was not too much younger than you when Gabriel visited you? My distance from you has had something to do with not being okay with other people (for example all those male priests in the Roman Catholic church I grew up in) telling me who you are instead of me hearing for myself who you are. They wanted me to think of you as a perpetual Virgin, as conceived without sin, and assumed into heaven instead of dying then going to heaven like the rest of us.

It may have seemed pretty harmless trying to honor and revere you, but it was as though they were packaging you up like a perfect Barbie on display, ever flawless, endlessly beautiful, perpetually virginal. So, I just couldn't buy it!

So here's what I want to know: Were you as pure as they say you were? I mean really, did you ever have a negative thought in your life? Did you know how lucky you were to get pregnant right away, when so many women struggle to get pregnant or even keep the pregnancies they have full term? Did you realize it was still a miracle *that you could* have a child even if you weren't like most of us giving birth to the son of God? Were you ever exacerbated or exhausted when you had a little infant? Did those sleepless nights wear on you like they do most parents? Did you ever feel yourself worn thin when Jesus was a toddler and you were trying to teach him manners but he kept on saying 'No!' to you the way that toddlers can? And when Jesus left the group on that Passover celebration where you couldn't find him for *3 Whole Days*; when you were worried sick about him did you react like most mothers when he sassed you saying "Why were you searching for me?" did you grab him by the ear and say it's fine you were in your Father's house but it would have been nice if you could let your parents know?!

I wrestle with how complacent, compliant, pure and perfect people make you out to be. For example in today's scripture reading the *only* indication that you had anything of a human reaction to the angel Gabriel coming to visit you is that it says you were, "much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be."

Really?! Come on! 'much perplexed' saying, (in a most civil tone) "Oh how interesting that this angel of the Lord our God has come to me?" Is this a polished, perfect account of how it went? Or was it more like the knock-down drag-out Jacob had with the angel? Its okay if you want to admit that....I won't tell anyone....

Sincerely *and faithfully*, Alanna [PHEW! Big Sigh]

Well, after writing my letter, *I felt good!* It was a cleansing experience. It was great to finally get these things off my chest. But... no sooner did I finish my rant then up popped this email *to me from Mary!*:

Dear Alanna,

It's good to hear from you and although you reached out because you needed to write your sermon, that doesn't make me any less grateful for your efforts.

Now this is what I want you to know (and its okay to share with your congregation in your sermon): *I am as human, conflicted and devoted as any woman or mother that ever lived.*

As for the people you say are trying to package me up like Barbie, *don't worry about them!* You are all doing your best with what Christian tradition you've been given. Since you are fully Episcopalian now, you know that it's okay to ask questions and wrestle with doubts. As your boss, Pastor Odie, has so eloquently written about me, "In the Anglican tradition there is a difference between the "fact" of the virgin birth of Jesus and the "theology" of the virgin birth. The 'fact' implies that it is historically true. The 'theology of the virgin birth' says it does not matter if it is factually true or not, and you are free to believe I had sex or did not have sex to become pregnant with Jesus. What matters *is who Jesus is!*"¹ Alanna, I know Pastor Odie doesn't come off as very sharp, but that boss of yours *is* smarter than he looks!

Now on to the Annunciation...of course when Gabriel appeared to me it was a shocker! That one word you refer to in scripture, 'perplexed,' contained a world of excitement, adventure, and fear. My legs felt like they were in cement, heavy unable to move. I was thinking to myself, *"What's going on that an angel of the Lord is appearing to me?!"* First of all I was a woman, a young woman without status at that! In my day angels only appeared to men: powerful, gifted men. But Gabriel said something to me *that just opened me up*, that just made me think that anyone so human, so powerless as I am was honored to hear: Gabriel called me *"Favored One!"* He said that *I* had "found favor with God."

Wow! Those words just about knocked the wind out of me. Don't they do that to you? These words are for you too you know. They are for *all* of you, *all* of humanity. *You are the favored ones of the Lord!* In our insignificance, in our brokenness, in our human *failings* we *have all found favor with God.*

Now, God is no fool. God knows we still fall short, but here's the miracle... *we are loved by God anyway.* *We are worthy* because we *have been made worthy* through the gift of his Son, my son, our Lord Jesus Christ.

And yes, like all women who *try to have* children or *have* children, I didn't understand the full scope of being a parent. I certainly *did know* it was a privilege and miracle to have a child. What I didn't fully understand was that as a mother I would have to entrust my child to the world; to be there to comfort him when those he was trying to help rejected him; or to have him die first before death came to me.

As a person in any age called by God to anything, sometimes we say "Yes" without knowing all the implications...*and* God's love, presence and hope is what gives us strength to endure the unexpected, to see transformation, to see how the impossible *becomes* possible with God.

¹ *Comparing the Episcopal Church to the Roman Catholic Church and other Protestant Denominations*, by The Rev. Dr. Robert "Odie" Odierna.

You're right, the Annunciation *may or may not* have happened as politely as Luke said it did. You know how men are, they actually believe that we get amnesia about the pain of childbirth or that we want to wear pantyhose. Sometimes they stretch reality to suit a certain purpose. *But all that matters* for any of us is that when we are called by God to step out into the unknown *that we trust the "Yes" we give is also a gift from God remembering* that we are favored, *trusting* that God will carry us *even* when we struggle.

Timing is everything in relationships, maybe even in our relationship with God, so it was the right time and place for me to say, "Yes." I was not complacent, compliant or submissive in my "Yes." *In time I became* confident, courageous and responded with the impulse of love God showed me when he said I was his "Favored One."

This is the movement *God is calling all of us to* this fourth Sunday of Advent, "That we move from *who we think we are, to what God has called us to be*; that we acknowledge and participate in the *very transformation of God*. It is no small journey to go from our comfortable perceptions of God to God in the manger: vulnerable, helpless, dependent. *Yet, this is the promise of Christmas.*"²

So as each of you await Christ on Christmas know *you are favored* and *you, your very body and soul is the mansion, the bridge, the temple and dwelling place of our Lord*.

Love always,
in Christ,
Mary (yes, that Mary, the mother of God)

Community Context: The Episcopal Church of the Good Shepherd, Nashua, NH- Sunday Services (8 & 11:15 a.m. [9:45 a.m. was Advent Wreath Children's Sermon])

Sources: Workingpreacher.org; *Comparing the Episcopal Church to the Roman Catholic Church and other Protestant Denominations*, by The Rev. Dr. Robert "Odie" Odierna.

² "To be Regarded" by Karoline Lewis for Workingpreacher.org