

Psalm 89: 1-4 & Luke 1: 26-38

Been There, Done That, Will Do It Again

This morning, on this fourth Sunday of Advent which is also the eve of Christ's birth, you and I stand at the threshold of the world, our world that would be transformed forever, because God came down to dwell among us. What kind of God would do that? We listen to the testimony from the past. The reading from the Hebrew Scripture, Psalm 89:1-4.

- 1 I will sing of your steadfast love, O Lord, forever;
with my mouth I will proclaim your faithfulness to all generations.
- 2 I declare that your steadfast love is established for ever;
your faithfulness is as firm as the heavens.
- 3 You said, 'I have made a covenant with my chosen one,
I have sworn to my servant David:
- 4 "I will establish your descendants for ever,
and build your throne for all generations."'

With such conviction, the writer of the psalm says he will sing, proclaim and declare God's steadfast love and God's faithfulness, forever, to all generations. The psalmist seems to know this to be the unchanging truth in the changing world. But how?

Well, because...the Psalmist continues, "You, God, you said," recalling God's words in the ages past, "You promised to your servant David to establish his descendants forever and build his kingdom for all generations." The covenant God made to David ages ago, that God would uphold his dynasty forever, no matter what, unconditionally, is the foundation of trust and hope of God's people, the house of Jacob, Israel. God's faithfulness and the continuation of David's lineage would go hand in hand.

Another lesson from the Hebrew Scripture for today is 2nd Samuel chapter 7. We're not reading it this morning, but it tells of the time when King David, after years of wars, was finally settled and could reflect on his situation. He had built for himself a luxurious home, but God was still out in the tent, so David said, "I'll make a beautiful house for God, too." He consulted Nathan, a prophet and his confidant, and Nathan said, "yeah, go ahead, for the Lord is with you." But he spoke too soon, for God said, "no you won't," as if to say, "you cannot domesticate me by confining me to a temple, no matter how beautiful. I shall dwell where I will."

Then God said to David, "don't you know, I journeyed with Israelites through the wilderness, and lived in the ark in the pitched tent. For all those times I moved about among the people of Israel, did I ever complain or told you I needed you to build me a house?" God's

point: I was with you in the past, I am with you now and I will always be with you, temple or no temple. That's when God made the promise to uphold the lineage of David forever.

Later on, David's son, King Solomon built the Temple, but it was ultimately destroyed by the foreign power of Babylon. The Israelites were taken captive and the Davidic monarchy disappeared. Imagine what a blow it must have been to them. After 70 years, they were able to return from the exile in Babylon and rebuild the temple, only to come under the rule of another foreign power, the Roman empire. They were again the people who walked in the darkness, still holding fast to the words of the psalmist proclaiming the steadfast love and the faithfulness of God, because of the promise God to David.

Now, God, out of God's freedom, in fullness of time, decides to take a new dwelling place. Listen now to the Gospel according to Luke, chapter 1: 26-38.

26 In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, 27 to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. 28 And he came to her and said, 'Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.' 29 But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. 30 The angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. 31 And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. 32 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. 33 He will reign over the house of Jacob for ever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.' 34 Mary said to the angel, 'How can this be, since I am a virgin?' 35 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 holy; he will be called Son of God. 36 And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. 37 For nothing will be impossible with God.' 38 Then Mary said, 'Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.' Then the angel departed from her.

As a portal to the world of Flesh, God found favor in Mary, young woman of no social standing *except* that she was engaged to Joseph, a descendant of the king David. God chose her to be part of God's intention to keep the "forever" promise God made to David long ago. Still opting out of the splendor of the human-made Temple and preferring to be with the lowly and the humble, God chose her to enter into the dwelling place of God's own choosing, which is among the people, as one of us, drawing us, you and me, into God's plan of everlasting kingdom.

In that moment, the shape and form of the kingdom of David was changed forever. The kingdom this son of David, Jesus, builds would be of God, and of heaven. And its citizens are whoever does the will of God. And Mary led the way.

Mary was perplexed at the appearance of Angel Gabriel, but Gabriel greets her with the assuring words that God found favor in Mary, and goes on to tell her what God is planning to do. Mary doesn't understand how all that could come to pass, but offers herself in full trust of God's ability to do something great and beyond her comprehension, through her. So, she responds, "Let it be with me according to your word."

And therein is an invitation, to all you gentlemen as well as ladies, to all of us to imagine ourselves as Mary, as a servant of the Lord to be found in favor with God. God knew her heart that she would offer herself to God's service without reservation, yielding her mind, body and spirit to the Holy Spirit, to work with God, to be on God's team to accomplish God's purpose in and for the world.

The story of annunciation is not just something that happened to a young woman who lived long ago in a faraway place. And the testimony of the psalmist about God's steadfast love and faithfulness is not only for those who wait for a Messiah to reestablish the earthly Davidic kingdom; it is also for us, for whom God took the risk of becoming of one of us. God, the cosmic force of the divine love, the creator of the universe from the beginning of time, swept through the time and space and showed up as an individual, like you and me.

God's been there with David, helping him guide and lead his people like a shepherd would his flock. God's been there. And God sent Angel Gabriel to reach out to the lowly, humble young woman, to be do her part in God's plan, by becoming the mother of Jesus, so God could walk with us and among us. God's done that. And God is doing now and will do it again, to you, through you, and with you, to engage the world so God's will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Truly, God is with US. It is this God, Immanuel, whose birth we celebrate this Christmas and every Christmas. Love of God has come to us. And God will do it again in the future, until God's heavenly reign covers the earth, and the world is fully restored.

We have Mary to learn from; to learn how to say, "let it be with me according to your word" and to yield our life to the word. Gabriel told Mary as far as the birth of the son of God, but naturally it followed that she became a mother; she was not done after giving birth to Jesus in a rather dramatic way. Her call was specific, as his mother to tend to him, feed him, nurture him, protect him... and we know her heart would be broken, but God was with her, the favored one.

Not an easy task, but a holy one because she was made part of the Holy Story of God and God's dealing with the world. As we are.

What might Angel Gabriel be saying to us, telling us of the ways we are to be part of God's holy story, of restoring and redeeming this broken and fearful world? What is our part?

My daughter just started working as a social worker in the ICU of a large hospital. Even now, the hospital workers, from doctors to nurses to techs, are still stretched thin and, despite all good intentions of all the dedicated staff, our healthcare systems remain challenged in many ways. My daughter's job is to coordinate the medical and social services to meet the needs of patients during and beyond their hospital stay. She soon discovered how disjointed and disconnected the whole system was. As a "float" worker, she walks into the office in the morning and find a list of patients with any combination of diverse needs. There are times she doesn't get to complete the care for a patient, and she leaves detailed notes on the chart, so whoever comes in for the next shift can pick up where she left off. Then she comes back in the morning to a new list of patients. And there are more families than she can "get to" in one day. She is free to start with anyone on the list. She could start with the simplest and the easiest cases. But, if she sees a family she's worked with before, no matter how complicated, or especially if they were complicated, she chooses to start her day with them, knowing it would help to bring some sense of coordination and connection in an otherwise disjointed service. It's a small moment of decision. And it doesn't fix everything, but she knows that she has the power to make that difference for that patient and family.

God always rules in opposition, which means that it does not appear God reigns. If we take cues from what's going on in our world today, it seems far from God's reign. But God is working in hidden places, in specific situation, through unlikely and unexpected ways, and we, individually and as the body of Christ in the world, are part of it. Temples, both the First and the Second, have fallen, the earthly throne of the Davidic kingdom has disappeared, but that end was only the beginning of another form of kingdom, where Jesus our Lord is our prince of peace, and we are the citizens. The war is still raging in the land where Jesus once walked. Tragedy seems too large for any one of us to do anything about. But God called upon Mary, with a specific part in God's larger plan. Let us prepare our hearts to welcome our Prince of Peace. Let it be with us according to his words. Amen.