

## PASTORAL PRAYER

Gracious God, Lord coming soon, our anticipation is almost tangible. The world holds its breath, for we about to receive our Savior, born as a lowly, nondescript child. Help us not, Holy God, to receive the child like adults, seeing Christ's coming as a yearly event, humdrum, commonplace. Let us not associate the coming of our Lord with wrapping paper, checklists, presents, or obligations. Help us let go of our assumptions and to grasp wonderment and curiosity like a child, for the coming of our Christ is indeed a spellbinding event, capable of incredible transformation. Help us find transformation today, gracious Lord, as we present ourselves to you. Hear the burdens and joys of our hearts, God.

Wonderful God, we praise you because you choose us. You choose us each day to be your hands and feet in a needy world. We know that this is not simply our privilege; it is our responsibility. Help us, God, when we don't feel like service to serve. Help us, God, when we don't feel like living kindness to be kind. Help us, God, when we don't feel like listening to someone who has been wronged to open ourselves to their cries. Gracious God, like Mary, we seek to take hold of the calling that you place upon us, the callings that will lead us to greater fulfillment and growth in your Spirit. Sometimes they take us to places that are not comfortable, but they ultimately provide life for us and for all those around us. Help us to see where you want us to go, where you lead us lovingly, and to seize those opportunities to live out our calling. We pray all these things in the name of the Lord coming very soon, Jesus the Christ, who taught us to pray as one...

## SERMON

Oh, before I start the sermon, I have a few things that I forgot to handle. Connie, will you play the piano every Sunday for the next year? Thanks. Choir, great job today. Would

you mind singing every Sunday in 2015? Thanks for helping out. Also, I want everyone to know that I'm choosing to take the month of February off. Is that cool with you? OK, thanks! Jeff, would you mind preaching for the month of February? Great! Thanks for all your help. I really appreciate you volunteering to do so much!

None of these things I'm really asking for, but it's an example of what I'm talking about today. In each of these appeals, I'm phrasing them as a request but answering for you instead of allowing you to answer for yourself. I'm asking for volunteers but telling you that you are going to volunteer. There's a term for being invited to do something in which before you can agree, you are told to agree, by explicit word or implicitly. This is called being "volunt-told." I've been volunt-told for many things in my life. I was volunt-told in high school that I was going to go into competitive public speaking. Once you get married, you find that the volunt-telling goes way up. My dear wife has those "questions with one answer." For example, "You're going to go to the store today...right?" or "Are you sure you want to wear that shirt and tie combination?" Like I said, questions with one answer. With my wife, I know that she means nothing off-putting by it. Sometimes when you are volunt-told, it can come as off-putting, and it should. There are those times when "volunt-telling" is a veiled form of cruelty, and we are supposed to be quiet and just do what someone wants us to do. That is a form of violence. Other times, it's no big deal; it's just a frame of communication. On first glance, we can look at the story of Mary and the angel Gabriel as a form of God "volunt-telling" Mary what to do, but that's only a surface reading. God never "volunt-tells" us what to do; God tells us what is the most life giving way to go and then gives us a choice whether to respond or not. Let us look at how God "volunt-tells" us what to do looking at the story of Mary and Gabriel and see how God calls us throughout life.

Our second scripture lesson comes from the Gospel according to Luke, which gives the most complete account of Jesus' beginnings. The story of Jesus starts with his mother, Mary. Mary does not expect the angel Gabriel showing up. "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you!" A great compliment but rather confusing. And then comes the common refrain when the message of God comes our way: "Do not be afraid!" Whether or not we are afraid at this sight, this definitely foretells that greatness is coming. "You will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus." Gabriel uses the scripture from 2<sup>nd</sup> Samuel to exemplify his point: this is the one who will come and occupy the throne from the House of David. She is, of course, confused, and doesn't mind asking for slight clarification on the matter. It's not disagreement but confusion.

At first glance, it appears that the Honorable Mary doesn't really have a choice but to do exactly as the angel has described. It appears to be a "volun-telling" or a "question with one answer." And, I can imagine, it could feel that way. Gabriel doesn't stop and ask her... "So...this getting pregnant thing outside of your marriage...is that cool with you?" or "Do you think you can handle this?" But, when you put this calling story in the grand scheme of scripture, it follows along the lines of how each and every other hero of scripture is called. They aren't asked, "so, how does that sound? Think you're up to it?" Nope. That's never the case. But, at the same time, every other Bible character called pushes back. We see how many Bible characters dispute the calling by listing all the reasons why he cannot respond. There are many examples. Moses cannot lead the Israelites because he has a speech impediment; he says he is "slow of speech." Abraham cannot have a great nation of his progeny because he has no heir. Gideon, one of the judges, needs proof that this is what he really should be doing and asks for it more than once. "God," he says, "let

this fleece I leave on the ground overnight be dry but the ground be completely wet.” Even though it happens exactly like he asks, he wants more evidence by, as he asks, letting the floor be completely dry while the fleece is completely wet. Jonah just plain doesn’t want to respond. Eventually, though, all of them do realize that God’s calling to them is the most life-giving and healthy way to go. But this is not the pattern here; Mary is told that redemption is going to come through her offspring, and she accepts the responsibility humbly. “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” As much as it seems otherwise, this is not a “volun-telling” of God to do what God wants. This is a holy calling from God to benefit all of God’s creation, and that calling is not just Mary’s but ours as well. Let’s unpack it.

All joking aside about how we can be “volun-told,” this scripture must come with a warning because there is inherent danger. We all know that any scripture can be highly misused to abuse people, and I really hate it when that happens. I found it interesting to note Mary’s calling in the entirety of scripture. So many characters are called, but Mary’s calling is a unique calling; it is the only time that God directly calls a woman in all scripture, whether or not through an angel. Each of scripture’s callings has a different tone, but what makes Mary stand out is that she accepts the calling without argument. As I just explained, that is not typical. All of these ingredients can create a toxic cocktail. This scripture can easily be interpreted and utilized unfaithfully toward making women second-class citizens. As Mary has always been the key example for women throughout history, her lack of pushback can easily be translated that a true Christian woman does exactly what she is told by the men in charge of her without any argument. That’s not the point here. One can’t necessarily say the same thing for men, as so many men were called but none of them who

argued were dismissed by God because of their arguments. It should not be different for women. I want to make very clear that we should not hear a message of women's subordination in Mary's example. That is the point of this scripture, and that's definitely not my point. We can joke about "volun-telling," but we must guard against this very nasty form. Scripture is never about binding anyone down but freeing all people for joyful service. This scripture is about our own unique callings from God.

We see this as the "volun-telling" of God: our calling in this world. That is a big word: "calling," and it has a lot attached to it. It's much more nuanced than we normally think of it. It's not big. It's not small. It's big AND small. It's not a one-and-done proposition; calling happens over and over. God continually calls us each day, each moment of our lives to follow a course of wellbeing for ourselves and the ways we can minister to all people. What we need to take from this scripture today is how we find our calling and how we seize it. When it comes to our respective callings, it is never a "volun-telling" of God. God knows the course we have been set upon to enhance ourselves, our communities, and the greater Body of Christ around the world. God therefore calls us to follow that path with all of our strength and skill.

But God never manipulates us into doing what exactly God wants. Unlike those "questions with one answer," we always have a choice with God. Each and every moment our calling comes in the smallest and greatest ways. Sometimes it can be easy: making choices that benefit our health and our wellbeing. Other times, it can be attending to the care of another person. Our callings can either be taken up or they can be set aside. We can take it, or we can leave it. Both have their consequences. They are not God-given consequences but the natural consequences of not living as well as we should. But there is

always life to be found when we seize the calling that God places on us each moment, day, and age of our lives, and it is never too early or too late.

This idea of calling comes to live among us in some big and small ways. We certainly should not neglect the smallest ways that calling has and will live among us. Next week, I am excited to say that I'll be conducting my first baptism of June's great grandchild. Baptism is a holy reminder of who we are as God's people, but it is also an affirmation of calling from the youngest of ages. Some people have theological problems with baptizing infants, but to baptize infants is recognizing God's call already on them. Baptism is not an act of humanity but an act of God. The sprinkling of the water is more of an affirmation than it is an act; the real work is the work of the Holy Spirit, and God works in each person before we even have a chance to accept God's work in our lives. In other words, it's already acknowledging God works to guide and lead us at all ages. God is already working in the life of those who are baptized, and the baptism acknowledges that fact. Indeed, this next week will be a time of great celebration, from the celebration of this child's baptism to the greater acknowledgement that for all time, a child has been born to us that is Jesus Christ the Lord.

The point is that callings can seem very scary from the stories we hear, but here's the secret key: you won't miss the boat unless you really choose to miss the boat. We may not get a grand proclamation like that from the Archangel Gabriel, but that doesn't mean that we won't hear what we are meant to do in big and small ways. Sometimes we can be reminded of our calling in the ways that God speaks through a friend, through a loved one, or even through unwelcomed criticism. When our ears and hearts are oriented toward God, though, we will be reminded in the midst of all of these where our hearts and efforts

belong. We will find our calling because, from our first borning cry to our final breath, there is always work to be done to fulfill our calling. It truly never ends, nor should we stop looking.

There will always be those times when we are “volun-told” to do something, by someone in charge, someone you love, someone you meet. Sometimes the way they deliver the message will be fun and tongue-in-cheek. Other times, it is someone using us for their own purposes. With God, we are never “volun-told.” God calls us. God directs us where to go. God is always in our lives, from the very beginning, and knows how we can best use our God-given gifts for the benefit of all people. God never wreaks havoc in our lives because we haven’t followed the calling as well as we might. We might suffer the consequences of our actions by our own hands, but God never seeks to punish and hurt us. Calling is not direction; calling inherently has a choice. Mary the mother of Jesus had a choice, and she accepted the calling of God that gave her life, gave the Christ child life, and gave the world renewed life. We have to have our ears open, our hearts open, and awareness of what we can offer the Body of Christ to continually find the calling for every phase of our lives, for, indeed, God is never done with us. Thanks be to God for the calling then, the calling now, and the calling to come. Amen and Amen!