

The Lord is with you!

Luke 1:26-38

December 18, 2005

Peace be with you! The Lord is with you and has greatly blessed you!

Stop for a moment. Just stop what you are doing and what you are thinking and look at yourself. Look at yourself honestly, without all the posing, without all the supposing, without all the second-guessing. Look at yourself as you are, look at your life as it is, and tell me ... is it true? Is it true that the Lord is with you and has greatly blessed you?

I look at my own life with all its twists and turns, its ups and downs, its successes and failures, its unspeakable delights and its shattering disappointments. I look at my own life -- mundane and unremarkable and largely forgettable -- and I can only say, "Yes." I know that Lord is with me and has greatly blessed me!

Those words were originally addressed to Mary. Mary lived some twenty centuries ago in Nazareth, a town sixty miles north of Jerusalem and fifteen miles west of Lake Galilee. She was likely young -- she was engaged, but not yet married. And she was likely poor. When she and her husband took their child to the Temple to dedicate him, they offered a sacrifice of pair of birds, the offering permitted those who could not afford a lamb.

She was likely young and poor and certainly Jewish, but, other than that, we know very little about her. We know very little except this: we know her name and we know something about what she said and thought when a messenger from God came to her in Nazareth. Luke tells us her name and tells us her story. Matthew's gospel is the only other gospel to include an account of Jesus' birth, but it focusses on Joseph.

Luke's gospel takes special care to tell the stories of women as well as men. Only Luke's gospel includes the story of Jesus raising a widow's son. Only Luke's gospel includes the story of the dispute between Mary and Martha when Jesus visits their home. Only Luke's gospel tells the story of Jesus offering forgiveness to a woman who anoints his feet with perfume and her tears, and only Luke's gospel gives the names and histories and contributions of the women who were among Jesus' followers.

Luke's gospel makes it clear that women are part of the gospel story, too. Women too are disciples. Women too are people of faith. Women too are evangelists and leaders and teachers. Women too are witnesses to the power and love of God, women like Mary. Mary is not a saint; she is not a human being very different from the rest of us in identity and in destiny. Mary is a human being wholly like us, a woman, a poor young woman, a poor young woman who said, "Yes," to God.

God's messenger came to Mary and said:

Peace be with you! The Lord is with you and has greatly blessed you!

And Mary was deeply troubled.

Who me? The Lord is with me? What does that mean?

I would guess that most of us are content to go about our lives rather anonymously, not in the spotlight, not singled out, not burdened with great expectation or with great responsibility or with great blessing, whatever that might mean. We just want to be happy, just to be happy and to have some assurance that God will be close by if we happen to need God's help.

We think of God watching over us, looking in on us every once in a while to make sure we're OK. Or we think of God perched on our shoulder as it were, tagging along, keeping us out of trouble, as we make our way through life. Or we think of God as that unseen companion reminding us that we are not alone.

But the angel said to Mary, *The Lord is with you*. No more anonymity, no more quietly living out our lives in relative obscurity, no more answering only to ourselves. The Lord is with you, with you in a very specific and personal way, not just watching from a distance, not just tagging along, but with you. Wherever you go, you and the Lord go together, and who do you suppose is leading the way? As the saying goes: *If God is your co-pilot, you are sitting in the wrong seat!*

The son who was born to Mary is a king, the king of the descendants of Jacob and our king. He rules, he leads, we follow. When the Lord is with us, we are not alone and we are not our own. We owe him our allegiance, our obedience, our very selves.

Don't be afraid, Mary ... You will become pregnant and give birth to a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High God. The Lord God will make him a king ...

Mary had been troubled. Now she is flabbergasted.

My son will be great? My son will be a king, the king, the eternal king?

No. That's not what Mary says! That's not what has Mary buffaloed! She didn't hear a thing after those first few words: *You will become pregnant ...*

Pregnant? How?

That's a good question. Lots of folks have pretended to know how, one way or another, but I don't know how and I don't know if Mary knew how. What I do know is that Luke wanted to make it clear that God was doing this. God was doing this, there is nothing that God cannot do, this child is God's own child. The birth of Jesus, the incarnation of Jesus, the coming of Jesus into our world, is God's doing.

The how remains a mystery, not magic, but a mystery. Not magic -- Jesus does not suddenly appear fully grown, a heavenly emissary. It is a mystery -- a baby born of a young Jewish mother in the normal way, her son, is somehow God's own Son, too. The One who is just like us is also God with us. The One who is our brother is also our Lord.

I am the Lord's servant, Mary said, may it happen to me as you have said ...

Mary was ready. Ready to do what was asked of her, ready to see this through, ready for this new and wondrous blessing to be bestowed on her and to be bestowed on the world through her.

Mary was ready. Because her questions have been answered? Because she finally understands? No, Mary doesn't understand and she never will understand! Because her troubled heart has been put at ease? Mary's troubles and heartaches and griefs are only just beginning. She has every reason to be troubled, every reason to wonder what the future will bring, every reason to be afraid. But as troubled and confused and doubtful and afraid as she is, Mary is ready ... ready for what the Lord will do, ready for what the Lord will make happen, ready for the Lord to be with her.

And that is all the Lord asks of you ... to be ready. To be ready for the great blessing God intends for you, and to be ready for the great blessings God intends to give to Sally Walker and to Ed James and to Dusty Johnson and to Emily Highnam and to Jack Burg and to Mitzi Makinster and to your family and to your friends and to the people of Waterloo and Cedar Falls and New Orleans and Chinandega and Baghdad and Kashmir through you.

Peace be with you! The Lord is with you and has greatly blessed you!

A son has been born to Mary. A son has been born to us. His name is Jesus and he is called the Son of the Most High God. He is our king and he will lead us. He will lead us together to the land of God's promise.