

**Sermon for FPC Gardena – Sunday December 13, 2009**

*Luke 1:26-38*

**Life is full of all kinds of surprises!**

**There are the happy kind, of brief duration, but with lasting memories—a surprise party or a phone call from an old friend,**

**There are the joyful kind that will make a long-lasting difference in the paths our lives will take—a proposal of marriage, a new career opportunity, or a grandchild on the way.**

**There are the kind that we wish we never had to encounter at all—the dreadful medical diagnosis, the sudden death of a loved one, natural disasters which affect anywhere from a few to a few thousand people.**

**And then there are the kinds of surprises that will take some adjustment as we work to get past the shock of the news or event to reach the points of acceptance and eventually joy. Unplanned pregnancies definitely rank high in this category!**

**It was this latter type of surprise that Mary received. Surely it was good news, but it was certainly surprising—shocking really. There she was, a young girl, betrothed, wondering about the changes that lay ahead for her.**

**And suddenly, the surprises began to appear, piling one upon another in rapid succession....**

**A visit from an angel!**

**The annunciation of her pregnancy!**

**The news that this child would reign over the house of Jacob forever.**

**The word that the child in her womb was the son of God!**

**Added to all this was the very surprising news that Mary's older cousin Elizabeth, believed to be barren, was also pregnant.**

**Actually this announcement, brought to young Mary by the angel Gabriel was far more than a surprise, more even than a shock, this was a complete and overwhelming rerouting of any imaginings, ideas, or plans that Mary may have had for her life. With the admonition to 'not be afraid', Mary's life was suddenly devoid of any illusion of control.**

**Imagine that thoughts that might have raced through her mind—**

**A pregnant virgin—whose going to believe that?**

**There goes Joseph and any hope of marriage.**

**Will my family put me out of their home?**

**Will I be shunned? Or even stoned?**

**What is to become of me now?**

**In reality, of course, none of us has any real control of our lives, though we may imagine that we do. We schedule our appointments and plans on our calendars or daybooks. We make short and long-term plans for our educations, our careers, our families, our finances. But, in the end, all manner of surprising or shocking turns of events can redirect the courses of the days and years before us. Most of these we cannot change. All that we can really do is to regulate our responses to events that take us by surprise.**

**An example that comes to mind is the late Christopher Reeve. A popular and accomplished actor, devoted husband and father, gifted athlete, his life was changed in the instant that he fell from his horse mid-jump. Suddenly he was paralyzed from the neck down, unable to breathe on his own, completely dependent upon the help of machines and human caregivers for his every need. He could have given up. He could have wallowed in self-pity. Instead, he became a spokesperson and fundraiser for spinal cord injury research and treatment. He set goals for his own recovery and worked hard toward achieving them. He found creative ways to continue his acting career. And Christopher Reeve thrived on the deep love of his wife and children. Although he eventually died as a result of his condition, he will always be remembered as the actor who played Superman, and as the man who defined what it truly means to be a superhero—brave and giving.**

**When life doesn't go the way we had imagined or planned—in big or small ways, we have not only to deal with whatever change or obstacle has altered our course, but we must also deal with the realization that we don't always get to choose. Life happens.**

**We can be as careful as can be, but accidents still occur.**

**We can behave as faithfully and lovingly and according to all the rules of society, but that does not inoculate us from the consequences of the choices and actions made by others.**

**We can work hard, putting in extra hours, going the extra mile for our employers and still find ourselves unemployed and in financial difficulty.**

**Think about it.....**

**Bring to your mind a particular moment in your life when you can recall the realization, an 'annunciation', if you will, of your life's course being challenged and changed midstream—due to something that was happening in your life or in the life of someone very close to you.**

**Can you remember your feelings, your inner reactions, your outer responses?**

**I can vividly recall such a moment in my life....**

**The feeling of utter despair...The unquenchable waterfall of tears....**

**The less than eloquent prayer in my heart, “Please God no, please God no,”**

**The instinctive reaching out to the very closest, most trusted family and friends...And, in the midst of it all, making the arrangements that had to be made, taking the steps that needed to be taken.....and, along the way, discovering that these first responses would be the first of many as the situation developed and changed in ways, good and bad, that I could not possibly have foreseen.**

**Perhaps you have handled your life-altering moments with far more grace than I have, but if I am going to be utterly honest, my initial response to that one particular twist in my journey was a mixture of inner terror-despair-pleading and outward automatic-pilot actions.**

**Mary, young Mary, responded to the message of the angel Gabriel, to God’s intervention in her life, to news which would certainly disrupt her peace of mind and whatever plans she had made, with a single question, “How can this be?”, followed by gracious acceptance, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; Let it be with me according to your word.”**

**Mary responded with pure grace.**

**Mary could have argued with God, as Moses once did, claiming that she was not equipped for the task set before her.**

**Mary could have tried to run and hide from God, as Jonah once did, intending to avoid the call that had been extended to her.**

**Mary could have behaved as many of her Old Testament predecessors had in difficult circumstances—through bargaining, deception, or outright refusal to accept God’s call, but instead she exhibited a kind of grace, a depth of personal peace as yet unseen on biblical terrain.**

**Her single question, “How can this be, since I am a virgin?” shows that Mary was already thinking ahead to the consequences that her new circumstances would bring. And, while she couldn’t possibly know the specifics of the challenges that awaited her, she must have realized that this would not be the last major alteration of her life’s journey. Yet she responded with courage and faith.**

**Mary had one advantage—God was in on the plan for her to bear the holy child, the Son of God. The news had come to her through an angel! And so she could align herself with God’s will and move forward with some measure of confidence.**

**Most of the examples we have considered are different. I don't believe for a minute that God caused Christopher Reeve's injury, or any of the various troubles that challenge human beings in terms of health, finance, careers, or relationships come about as a result of God's action. Indeed, bad things, and extremely challenging circumstances, happen to good people—but not because God wills these things to happen.**

**But I *do* believe that God dwells within us as Holy Spirit, and that as we encounter any of life's surprising challenges, God is at hand to guide us on a path that will lead to reconciliation, wholeness, and peace. Once the events have been set in motion by whatever means they have occurred, God is there by our side, ready to partner with us in moving forward in ways that can bring about the best possible outcome.**

**Mary's challenge came from God. Ours come from the various chances and mysteries inherent in human lives. Yet God is present in each and every one of us, from Moses to Mary, to you and to me, ready and willing to companion and guide us along the paths of grace and hope as we respond to our calls and carry out our tasks in the furthering of the ministry of Jesus Christ. And it is the courage and strength with which Mary responded to the angel Gabriel and to God which allows us to strive to do the same.**

**Surprises.....Shocks.....Twists and turns in the roads of our lives.....  
Unexpected changes.....Each of these have come to us more than once,  
and no doubt they will again. What can we learn from Mary, and her  
response to the angel Gabriel, that might assist us in our reactions and  
responses the next time we are faced with such a situation?**

**First, I think, we would do well to give up the illusion of control—well  
before the angel’s announcement falls upon our ears. We need to accept, as  
Mary did, the truth that we do not ultimately set the courses for our lives,  
and that sometimes our response to change is the only choice that is ours.**

**Next, as people of faith, we can work on our own awareness that the child  
that Mary bore, Immanuel, is truly God with Us...that the Holy dwells in  
our hearts and minds and will always partner with us to guide us to journey  
on paths of righteousness and grace.**

**And, finally, we can follow Mary’s example, which is a receptive one, as a  
servant of the Lord. We can learn, through prayer, study, worship and  
community, to be open to serving God in all that we say and do, first in the  
simple things, and eventually, as Mary did, in those most challenging events  
and moments of life, “Let it be with me according to your word.” Amen.**

**Luke 1:26-38**

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. 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." Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" 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. 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. For nothing will be impossible with God." 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.