

Sermon by The Rev. Betsy Johns Roadman, 12/18/05
St. Augustine's Church, Croton-on-Hudson, New York
4 Advent; Text: Luke 1:26-38

When I was little, I always wanted to play the part of Mary in the Sunday school Christmas pageant. Mary was definitely the best girl's part. She had the prettiest costume, except for the angel Gabriel. Mary got to wear a robe and veil that were a beautiful blue, edged in gold. A circle of something gold and glittery held her veil in place. When Mary was on, she was center stage.

I never got to be Mary in my Sunday School Christmas pageant. Maybe I'm not remembering this exactly right, but it seemed like Mary was the girl with long, flowing blond hair, and most of us were ordinary brunettes. Or maybe Mary was the minister's daughter, or the girl whose aunt or mother was directing the pageant. In any case, Mary was a special part, and you had to look special, or be someone special, or know someone special to play Mary. Ordinary girls didn't get to be Mary.

My impression of Mary as exceptional and set apart has been reinforced over the years through music and art. Hymns hail her as God's favored one. Icons and paintings and stained glass windows portray her as tranquil and prayerful. She wears beautiful clothes and has a circle of something gold and glittery around her head. She's usually seated in a perfectly appointed room, looking like a queen. She never seems tired or hassled. The sudden appearance of a heavenly messenger would be no big deal to her; in fact, she's probably expecting it. And whatever message that angel might convey, she'll accept it with calmness and grace. Mary is truly someone set apart, someone special. She isn't anything like me or anyone I know in real life.

It's a shame that we've set Mary apart like this, because when we do, we miss the point of Mary's story. The point is that Mary was perfectly ordinary. She wasn't rich or famous or powerful. People around her didn't make a fuss about what she looked like, or how nice her house was, or what a good neighborhood she lived in. No one with influence was nudging God to choose Mary. There was nothing about her that set her apart in the eyes of the world.

Mary was perfectly ordinary. She wasn't a spiritual giant. She didn't capture God's attention because of how good she was, or because of how much money she gave to those who had less than she did, or because of how much Scripture she knew by heart.

Mary believed in the presence, and the power, and the love of God, and she was simply willing to make room for God in her life by saying to God, "Here am I." God called her, and she was willing to live fully into that call. For her, it meant that she was the one who would give birth to Jesus – the full and perfect revelation of God. For her, it meant the privilege of being the bearer of God into this world.

Isn't that what you and I are called to be as well – the bearer of God into this world? Like Mary, we're ordinary people, not particularly set apart, not spiritual giants. We're

simply people who are willing, or who at least want to be willing, to make room for God in our lives. By professing faith in Christ, by being a part of this faith community, we're saying, "Here am I."

For us, being the bearer of God in the world will not mean being the mother of Jesus, as it did for Mary. But it might mean being a parent of a child with special needs, or the child of a parent with special needs, whose care and nurture require a complete reordering of life as we had known or expected it to be. It might mean putting our job on the line as we take a stand for integrity in a business deal in which being less forthcoming means higher profit. It might mean gently, but firmly, confronting a friend, relative, or co-worker who is engaging in potentially dangerous behavior, with the very real possibility that such a confrontation will break the relationship.

Being the bearer of God in the world isn't always about something big or dramatic. It might mean giving someone the benefit of the doubt or a second chance. It might mean being open to forgive when the hurt is very deep; consistently expressing genuine appreciation; sharing generously that with which we've been abundantly blessed; speaking kindly rather than sarcastically.

Being the bearer of God in the world means making room for God to be active in and through our ordinary lives. We don't know whether or how our God-bearing efforts will make any significant difference. Often we won't be able to see, or even anticipate, the results. But the implications and the results are up to God, not us. All we need to do is make room for God by saying, "Here am I."

The presence, the power, and the love of God are real. God can and does break into our ordinary lives, just as God did in Mary's life. God's work through us might even radically change the world – the world of our closest personal relationships, the world of our workplace, the world of someone who is suffering. Will we, like Mary, make room for God?

The part of Mary is being offered to us in the pageant of our lives. Will we take it on? Will we be bearers of God in the world? Will we say to God, "Here am I?" Amen.