

Luke 1:26-38 Pastor Bill Uetrict 12/18/12 4 Advent

Today's sermon has to be a heart-to-heart talk with you. I have to admit that the preparation for this opportunity for proclamation didn't come easy for me this past week. Oh, it wasn't that I didn't know what I wanted to talk about. I knew I wanted to preach a sermon about control, but I wasn't sure how to get into that message. I like to keep you attention. I like to grasp it from the beginning. I like to shape, fashion what I have to say so that it is compelling, so that you from the beginning are wrapped up in the word that is being proclaimed.

But nothing came to my mind that would enable me to do that. So I decided to read and read and read. Maybe one more blog would take me to where I wanted to go. Maybe the book I was reading would inspire me with a story that I could share. Maybe a previous sermon would accomplish the task. But nothing did the trick. And it was eight o'clock on Friday morning. Something needed to happen. The time to formulate, the time to create, the time to engineer had arrived. And nothing, nothing came. And then it struck me that the very thing I was going to talk about—control, our need for it—was being embodied in my approach to this sermon. For me the word to preach was something for me to engineer, something that I needed to mold in my own hands. But a voice came to my own spirit that said: "What if preaching is not about *your* engineering? What if it is not really about you after all? What if it is about your getting out of the way, getting out of the way so that text might speak, getting out of the way so that ultimately a word from God is spoken and heard." And I responded to that voice, "Who wants to let go of control?"

It's clear that David didn't want to let go. In some ways you've got to feel for David. He seems to have the right heart. He's been living

in some abode for the rich and the famous, a palace made of cedar. And he's thinking that it's not right that he is so comfortable and that the God of Israel and ultimately of the universe is confined to a box—called the Ark of the Covenant. David wants to build God a nice home. After all, God deserves it.

Well, the word of the Lord came to the prophet Nathan the night that David was making his plans for God's home. And that word was this: "Go and tell my servant David: Get over yourself. Do you think you are the one who is going to build me a house? I've rather liked living in a box. It's suited me fine. I have been moving about in a tent and a tabernacle forever. I never told anybody that I need some palatial mansion. And by the way, you who want to control me, have you forgotten that it is *I* who took you from your pasture. It is *I* who took you from being a nobody to becoming a real big somebody. It is *I* who has been with you wherever you went. It is *I* who cut off all of your enemies from before you. So let go of yourself and your plans for me. You are not in control, O big boss man. I don't need a house . . . right now. Your son is going eventually to build one for me. But as for you, I do have some plans for you, though. I am going to build a house on you. You want to build a house for me. Guess what? I will make *you* a house. Your house, your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me. The kings of the future will be relatives of yours.

Wow! So much for control, David! You aren't in control.

What is this need that we have for control? Why do we live our lives, do our jobs, relate to our families as if they all are ours to control? I understand it, really. Disorder is a bit threatening, not much fun. Let's face it. Life is better when someone takes charge. From my perspective, good leadership is leadership that is willing to take charge.

There's nothing worse than a social engagement, a church event, a civic activity, a work project that no one shepherds. In such gatherings or ventures we all sit around waiting for someone to lead. Life needs direction. It is not meant to be lived rudderless. To truly live is not to be a pawn in life. We were created to create, made in the image of God so that we might help shape life. I always tell interns, "Take charge! Don't just let church life happen." So I understand our human propensity toward control.

But I suspect that there is more to our need to control than our desire to provide life-giving direction to it. Control is also the means by which we establish ourselves in life and in the presence of others. For some odd reason, we human beings have the need to justify our own lives. We have the need to prove our own worth in relationship to others. Control is how we think we can prove it. Control is how we justify our place in the world. And so often we feel that place slipping. So often we feel our worth disappearing. And so we further assert control. Maybe if we are able to take control we can maintain our worth. Maybe if we can take control we can assure that our lives have meaning. And so we grasp for control, looking ridiculous in the process, creating all kinds of stress in our lives, harming the relationships we value. If I am in control, I have a place.

And oh by the way, as I do all of this, I am aware, even if unconsciously, that lurking underneath all of life is this reality that unsettles everything, this thing that challenges every aspect of my living and all of my grasping for control. Death is a presence that I cannot ignore. Or can I? Control makes me think I can. Control for a while gets me beyond my limits, gets me beyond the threat of death.

Is this the only way we can live? Are we all just destined to be control freaks? I wonder if Mary offers us an alternative to a life lived on the basis of grasping, holding on, engineering, or controlling.

It was the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy. And Mary, a young woman who was engaged to a man named Joseph and who lived in a backward town named Nazareth, was visited by the heavenly realm. Life, you see, is not just about us. There is something deeper, something grander about it. Gabriel, the representative of the deeper and grander, addressed Mary. "Greetings, favored one." Oh my, we *have* value. We *have* worth. It is bestowed on us by the deeper and the grander. It comes from outside of ourselves. Favored ones, we are. Accompanied, we are. The angel said, "The Lord is with you."

A visit from the really grand, a visit from something that reminds us that life is bigger than ourselves, unsettles us. And so Mary was perplexed by the words of Gabriel. She wondered what his words might mean.

"Fear not," the angel said to Mary. Isn't it interesting that whenever in the Bible an angel appears to a person the angel says, "Don't be afraid"? The heavenly world must know that fear is at the center of the human experience. We all must live fearfully. Maybe that's why we grasp for control so much. We're afraid—afraid of what's going to happen, afraid of life slipping away from us, afraid of death, afraid that we won't be worth anything or have any meaning. And so we clamor for control.

But fear not, the angel says. Fear not, a word from God comes to those who are prone to fear. "You have found favor with God. Mary, (sing) *you shall bear a child and his name shall be Jesus, the chosen one of God most high.*" The heavenly realm is not opposed to us. The

heavenly realm is one from which we receive favor, worth, and meaning. And from that realm comes new birth, new life, comes salvation, wholeness, what we have been searching for all along. We grasp for so much. We engineer so much. We control so much because we believe that life is ultimately about what we do, what we are able to produce, achieve, or acquire, about our ability to save ourselves. But what if it isn't? What if life is fundamentally about what we receive from beyond ourselves?

Is there an alternative to a life lived on the basis of control? (sing) *"And Mary said, I am the servant of my God; I live to do your will."* There is an alternative to control. It's called faith. It's what Mary embodies. It's what Mary lives out. It's what we are called to.

Let's be honest. As David found out, control is a real illusion. Life, people and God are too big, too complex, and in the case of life and people, too messy for us to control them. We might as well give up trying to. Many folks say that the spirit of Christmas is giving. While I appreciate their sentiment, I would suggest that the spirit of Christmas is really *giving up* control, letting go. And Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."