

December 24, 2023  
The Fourth Sunday in Advent  
St. Stephen's, Catlett  
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2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16  
Canticle 15: The Magnificat  
Romans 16:25-27  
Luke 1:26-38

Unless a church celebrates the feast of St. Mary the Virgin on August 15, we usually get only one day a year to consider the role of St. Mary in our salvation history. She doesn't say much in the Gospels, and apart from a few appearances here and there, we don't see much of her. What she said today, though, is at the very heart and soul of our Christian faith. This is a faith rooted not so much in Christmas as it is in the promise God made to David through the prophet Nathan. David decided that it wasn't right that he should live in a fine palace while God lived in a tent or, when Israel was on the road, in an ark, a big box. David decides to build a permanent temple for God, Who is less than thrilled with the idea of being confined to a single building, no matter how glorious. Instead, says God, God will make David himself a house that "will be made sure forever before God; a throne that will be established forever" (2 Samuel 7:16). That throne will be described in later Hebrew literature such as the books of Daniel and Ezekiel, and then in the Revelation to John. The Person sitting on David's throne is, of course, God. When Paul talked about "the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages but is now disclosed" (Romans 16:26), he is referring, of course, to Jesus. The angel Gabriel tells Mary that "the Lord God will give Jesus the throne of His ancestor David... and of His Kingdom there will be no end" (Luke 1:33).

Mary is the key ingredient in this recipe for human salvation. The occupant of David's throne has to be a descendant of David, and therefore a human person who needs a human mother and a human birth. None of it made a bit of sense to Mary, who wasn't even married at the time, and was hardly a royal. It would be impossible, unthinkable, for any kind of king to be born to such a woman. Mary, completely aware of the absurdity of the angel's announcement, asks how in the world such a thing could happen. When Gabriel tells her how it will all work, Mary has no further questions and says quite simply, "Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it done unto me according to thy word" (1:38).

For whatever reason, God chose Mary. For whatever reason, God chooses us. For whatever reason, God announced His plans through the prophet Nathan and the angel Gabriel. For whatever reason, God announces His plans for us through prophets and angels. The only real difference between us and them is that we're not always aware when a prophet is speaking God's Word to us. We're not often aware when an angel is making an important announcement to us. But dare we assume that prophets and angels remain silent?

If we really don't believe that prophets and angels are all around us and have something to say to us, individually and corporately, then as Paul would say, "We are the most to be pitied" (1 Corinthians 15:19). I think at our deepest level, each one of us believes that God has something to say to us; our problem is two-fold: we aren't always listening, and when we do listen, we don't respond as Mary did. Granted, we have a long, rich, and glorious history of great people arguing with God and patiently explaining all of the flaws in God's plan. Abraham, Elijah, and Mary come to mind as about the only people who simply did what God told them to do. Mary stands alone in her response to the angel: "Behold the handmaid of the Lord. Be it done unto me according to thy word."

Our invitation is to use these last hours of Advent maybe to talk less and listen more, and when we hear what God has to say to us, through a prophet, and angel, or any other means, we remember that there's really only one right answer, and only one person who ever gave it.