

“Crying Out”
Luke 1:26-38

Ernest Gordon, theologian and preacher, later to become chaplain at Yale, wrote a book called *Through the River of the Kwai*, about the story of some British prisoners of war during World War II. They were held by the Japanese in northern Burma in a very difficult circumstance. This book tells how those in the camp interacted with one another. When these young soldiers realized that they were going to be there for a while, they began to have Bible studies and prayed diligently that they could be delivered from their present circumstances. He said, "We knew that the thrust of our praying was to be delivered from this prison camp and that was it. Our praying was shallow and superficial, and we were railing against God for letting us be here. But something happened to us and that kind of railing against God disappeared. And we began to move toward a more mature faith. We began to pray about how we could relate to one another in those bad situations. No longer was it 'Why, God?' But it was, 'How should we act, God?'" Gordon said the most spiritual moment of his life was Christmas 1944. Out of deference to the men in the camp, they were not given work detail that day and were given a bit more food. He said that as they moved around the prison yard, they sensed that things were different. In one of the barracks (basically a thatched hut with a dirt floor and open sides where the men slept), one soldier began to sing a Christmas carol. It was echoed over the infirmary where men were dying. Then all around the camp, the men began to sing, and those who could, those who were ambulatory, came to the parade field and sat there in a great circle. Gordon said, "God touched us that day." Gordon said it was the most sacred event that he had ever been involved with. No preaching, nothing of the usual church paraphernalia, just men united by their common misery, singing of God being with them and God's sovereignty. And he said, "We were touched by God." Christmas became real to him when he was touched by God in the surprising place of a Japanese prisoner-of-war camp in northern Burma.

So Christmas is not about wishes coming true. It is about the presence of God becoming true to us especially in the midst of suffering. It is about each one of us receiving the annunciation or the revelation of the Lord in the specific contexts of our lives. This kind of revelation frees us to love and serve without counting the cost. Our Bible story today is about Mary, the mother of Jesus, receiving her annunciation. Mary lived during a terrible time. Her country was occupied then, just like it is today. There were soldiers around and the Romans always had their ear to the ground. The religious leaders had all been co-opted, the young people went around dreaming of joining the Zealots and liberating their nation, while their frightened parents tried to keep them from doing anything stupid. The Pharisees went around banging on about morals because they believed that everything would be OK if you could just turn the clock back to some ancient version of national righteousness.

The Gospel of Luke sets the story amid the cries of the Jewish people for liberation from Rome's oppression, Rome's forced 'peace'. The words in this chapter of Luke echo the words from Isaiah 7:14, 'A young woman shall conceive and bear a son and you shall call his name Emmanuel, God with us', where the prophet Isaiah offered his people a sign of deliverance for Judah from the threatening alliance of its northern compatriots of Israel with the Syrians. Here the sign has been recycled to point to the coming liberation from the Romans. The world of Luke's infancy narratives is consistently one of faithful people crying out, often in nationalist terms, for liberation, awaiting a Messiah. A 'son of the highest' who would ascend David's throne, was a strong hope for the people. What is intriguing in this statement is that Gabriel draws directly on the language of II Samuel 7:11-16 and Psalm 89. Gabriel presents Jesus as the actualization of Yahweh's promise to David to create an everlasting dynasty. We often

spiritualize these hopes and think of personal salvation coming to us through Jesus. We reduce the story to something that Mary did because she had personal faith in God. The reality of it is that Mary acted according to God's desire for a whole people to be liberated. The young woman, Mary, receives news that she is to play an important role in God's purpose for the world. The angel Gabriel tells Mary what Jesus' life will mean for God's people: Jesus will be a great ruler, like King David; Jesus' reign will last forever; Jesus will be known as God's child. So, when Mary accepted this role of being the mother of Jesus, she accepted the call to help her people. Her action was even more radical than we think. We often think of her pregnancy bringing shame to her family because she was not married yet. But the bigger piece of this story is that Mary was acting to help save her people. She knew someone had to say yes to this role.

If we miss this radical piece, then the romance of the story becomes water in the sand. If we cannot connect this story with the yearning of all people everywhere who cry out for justice, it becomes, indeed, too often a comforting indulgence for the oppressors, or just another sweet story that gives us a happy feeling during Christmas but then is forgotten during the rest of the year. In the eyes of Mary we need to see the innocence and vulnerability of a twelve year old girl caught in a web of poverty. We may catch a glimpse of her in TV reports from the 'two thirds world'. We may think of village girls forced into urban prostitution, to survive a few more years AIDS rather than die of starvation at home, or catch the glance of the child laborer looking up after working all day to make less than a dollar for 16 hours of backbreaking work.

Jesus was born to this world to help bring good news to those who suffer. Jesus came to reverse the world's oppressive systems of dominations. Jesus came to liberate us so that we may be able to respond to the call in our world to work for the liberation of others.

A few years ago, the British organization Christian Aid launched a Fair Trade campaign. Change the rules. That's their slogan, and that's what needs to happen. Make the world fair. Give the poorer nations a chance. Give people a say in their lives, give them the freedom to support their families with dignity, open the doors so that their children can grow to their full potential the way ours do, let other cultures have a say as to what the world should look like. We all enjoy being consumers, but it is not big corporations should run the world, especially when they exploit and oppress people for profit. There is a better way. On November 15th of this year, our church hosted the 5th annual Christmas Fair. The profits from the event were around \$11,000. I am so thankful for the vision of Ann Emmans and Beth Stich and all those who helped to bring us a practical way where we can promote a different world. All the products and profits were about helping those who are not in the circles of power. I am thankful that they have said yes and that others in the congregation have caught this vision of promoting justice and fair trade. Even though the effort may seem small, I believe that its impact is far greater than the money raised because unless we look at our world as Mary looked at hers and say, no, that's wrong, like she did, how can we say, praise God? If we don't have Mary's dream of a new world burning in our hearts, how will we recognize the kingdom of God? And each one of us is called to be part of this amazing transformation of our world.

The United Methodist Bishop William Willimon once told this story, "One of my most favorite stories of call was the student who wrote that during his teenage years, "I was the teenager from hell." He made his parents' lives utterly miserable. He was so irresponsible in college that he flunked out and spent a couple of years working. While working, he met a woman and got married. They began attending a little church. Gradually, he came to the surprising awareness that God seemed to be calling him, calling him into the Christian ministry. So he went back to college. He dreaded telling his parents, after all they had been through, that now his life was

taking this unexpected turn. But he met with his parents and told them the story of the surprising turn of events, the way that, though his life had been a tortured series of mistakes and accumulated irresponsibility, he now believed that God wanted him to become a pastor. Suddenly, his mother burst into tears, saying, "I'm so ashamed! I can't believe this has happened!" He was troubled by her response. "What do you mean?" he asked. "I can't believe this has happened," she said. "Didn't I tell you that before you were born I had had a couple of miscarriages? I didn't think we would ever have a child. So I promised God that if he would let me have a baby, that I could bring to term, if it were a boy I would name him Samuel and would dedicate him to God, just like Hannah did back in the Old Testament." Sam, heard all of this with great astonishment. "Why didn't you ever tell me?" he asked. "You could have saved me a whole lot of trouble if you would have told me about this." "We're Methodists," the mother replied. "How was I to know something like this would work? I didn't even know that we even believed in this kind of thing. How was I to know that it would work?" All I am saying here is that if you think the story of Mary, being called by the angel Gabriel is strange, think again. Stories of annunciation, of vocation, of call, tend to be strange. They are not strange because God sends an angel to call someone, though sometimes God does, rather, they are strange because the one being called is us. Like Mary, we think of all of the reasons why this doesn't make any sense. We are not perfect people. We have baggage. We have limitations. Nevertheless, in our better moments, when the call comes, we, like Mary, simply say "Yes." This appears to be the primary way God changes the world. Through annunciation, through call and vocation. God changes the course of history, not through earthquake, wind and fire, but through ordinary people like Mary who get called. God works through ordinary people who say "Yes." Amen.