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Advent IV

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Luke 1:26-38



When you were 12, 13, 14 years old, what did you want to be when you grew up? I was raised just a handful of miles from Wrigley Field on the north side of Chicago, and for many years my running Halloween costume was a Chicago Cubs baseball player. I had the bright blue jersey with bold red lettering, pinstripe blue pants, a baseball glove on one hand, and a batting glove—complete with the Cubs logo—on the other. Dressed from head to toe in Cubs gear, I daydreamed of catching flyballs up against the ivy of Wrigley’s outfield wall and hitting the game-winning homerun.

During childhood and adolescence, our whole life seems to stretch out before us, a blank canvas upon which we can draw almost whatever we want....It seems that we have so much freedom, so much control over the direction our lives could take. And then we grow up; we age. As time passes, we have less flexibility, and our lives become more set. But still we basically hold onto our sense of control. Maybe my window of opportunity for becoming the Cubs’ right fielder has closed, but even with certain vocations clearly impossible at this point, I nevertheless maintain a sense that my life is essentially self-directed. As adults, we still seem to have a lot of control over the basic choices of our lives: where we want to live, where we want to go on our next summer vacation, what we want to eat for dinner tonight, etc. etc.

But sooner or later, something happens to puncture this illusion of control. This puncturing can happen either through unexpectedly good news or shockingly bad news; the point is not so much whether the puncture comes via “good” or “bad” events but rather that it comes so unexpectedly and out-of-the-blue.

Mary, for instance, experienced this puncturing of her illusions of control very early on in life. When the angel Gabriel appears to her, she was probably still a young teenager, maybe 13 or 14 years old, and her whole life stretched out before her. Prior to Gabriel’s arrival, how had she dreamed her life would unfold? What hopes, plans, expectations had Mary been cherishing? Maybe she dreamed about leaving her small town of Nazareth to visit the big city of Jerusalem; maybe she, like many women of her context, looked forward longingly to her wedding day and daydreamed about raising a family of her own.

Whatever Mary’s hopes and dreams, they were suddenly and permanently altered the day that Gabriel showed up. In the

passage we just read from Luke 1, Mary is going about her life, her everyday affairs, when God's angel suddenly appears and informs her about how her life would unfold. "Whether you want this or not," Gabriel implies, "you are going to become pregnant, give birth to a son, and name him Jesus." In a matter of moments, any illusions of control and freedom over the direction of her life are quickly dashed for Mary. "Oh," she discovers, "this life that I thought was mine to define actually isn't really about me. I'm one part of a much bigger God-sized story, and I've just been handed my lines."

As I've shared with some of you before, I too had a "Mary moment" in early 2016: I had just been admitted into a PhD program in Buddhist Studies when I received a clear and unmistakable calling to become a Christian priest. More than just a conviction, this was a calling that penetrated to the deepest core of my heart, and was so deeply piercing that I knew that a) it was a calling from outside myself, that b) this vocation was undeniably the true and right path for me, and that c) I absolutely had to trust, follow, and obey it, regardless of whatever difficulties might arise along the way.

Now, we tend to label these kinds of life-calling stories as positive, as a "good" thing, and they are, but one's sense of direction and control can also be curtailed due to events that are much less pleasant. Your workplace downsizes: the job you expected to provide years of security suddenly vanishes into a measly severance package. The doctor informs you about a terminal illness: you thought you had years, and it turns out you have only six months.

While this kind of news is much darker than Mary's divine pregnancy, we often react with a similar response of shock and disbelief. Like Mary, we ask, "How can this be...?" "I thought my life was going a certain way, and now you're telling me that things are going to be very, very different." Feeding this surprised reaction, like Mary's, is the jolt of discovering how little control we actually have over our lives. "I planned so well for X or Y or Z to happen"—to have a certain kind of career or family or marriage or retirement—"and now that's not coming to pass. How can this be?" "Oh," we say with crestfallen Mary, "I guess this story is a lot bigger than me, and I just received my lines."

Sooner or later that shock comes in various forms to all of us. It doesn't mean that God controls every minute aspect of our

lives or that we have no agency of our own to make decisions and, within limits, to follow the paths we personally wish to take. But it does mean that this story that we are all a part of is a whole lot bigger than you and me, and St Anne's, and Lincoln, MA. For reasons none of us can fully fathom or articulate, God has granted us roles in God's grand story, and every so often the events of that story jerk us into an awareness that God actually is the center around which we are all rotating, the axis upon which our very lives depend.

When those moments come, may we like Mary 2000 years ago, hear those crystal-clear angelic words, "Do not be afraid." We humans are fragile creatures, and when the shocks of life occur we quickly grow rattled, and angry, and frightened. But, says Gabriel, "do not be afraid." Whether the shocking, unexpected news is positive or is something much more troubling, "don't fear." Why? For the very reason that the shock occurred in the first place: because this is our loving God's story and not our own. We're not in control, and thank God, we don't need to be. If we had to be in control, we would have every reason to fear those life-shocks, which we in our own strength are not able to handle. But thanks to be to God that this is God's story, the great drama of God who loves you and me, and who ensures that at the end of time, when the curtain finally falls, "all shall be well." This story has a really, really good ending: I don't know what it is, but I do know that because it's God's story and not our own, the ending could literally not be any better.

So, along with Mary, may we hear the angel's reassurance "do not be afraid," and may we respond with Mary's confident hope and trust, "I am the Lord's servant, let it be with me according to your word." Amen.