

SOMETHING NEW

Sermon for Advent 4C—Lk 1:39-45

LPC, 12/23/12

Both of my children played the usual youth sports, but a strange thing happened over time. After they passed a certain age group it was clear that the coaches' interest was shifting away from providing each child with an experience of the game and toward actually winning the game. Gradually my kids began to notice they were spending more time on the bench.

This is the nature of things. People in charge do well to recruit the strongest and best to achieve the desired result. Everybody naturally does this.

Except God. You can legitimately argue that this is not a very efficient way to do things. But it's almost as if God got stuck coaching the baby leagues where the point isn't winning but giving everyone a chance to play. This makes no sense, but there it is.

God recruited a young peasant girl, not a mighty emperor, to help him upset the universe. And we hear part of her story today.

Mary the mother of Jesus was likely a teenager. She was definitely a female in a world where the male experience was considered normative. She was a youthful female at a time when, unlike today, the youngest had the least clout. And she was poor, at a time, like today, when poverty was more or less shameful.

Now, by the intervention of God, she was also pregnant before marriage. Most people would probably have assumed that the father was her fiancé Joseph, but Joseph and Mary both knew this was not possible, and it scared them both to death, though for different reasons

Here is a vulnerable young woman, at a vulnerable age, in the most vulnerable of conditions, without an ounce of self-importance, defensiveness, cynicism or sense of entitlement. But of all people she is blessed, because, in Elizabeth's words, she believed that there would be fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.

Here in the Gospel, God is doing something never before seen. This is the beginning of the Gospel Era, where God does something new. Human history is being broken open by vulnerable, trusting youth.

Now, there is something in Mary's story of her taking reasonable, though not obsessive, care to protect herself from the world. It's possible that Mary sought out her older relative Elizabeth in the Judean countryside, as described in today's story, to avoid gossip in her home town of Nazareth. But she had not protected herself from God. And that particular vulnerability set in motion the redemption of creation.

Unfortunately we modern folk get so used to self-protection that, unlike Mary, we even play coy with God. We hamper God's work in us by never putting ourselves at risk for God. We don't let ourselves be vulnerable before God.

And that's too bad, because from the beginning of the Gospel's, in this "Gospel Era" of salvation history (which continues through the present day, by the way,) it's evident that God employs the vulnerable to bring about God's purposes in the world. This is the something new.

But, how do we make ourselves vulnerable to God without becoming doormats for the world?

Generally, if something is from God, we should make ourselves vulnerable to it. How do you tell if it's from God? Generally, if it is compatible with what we believe in our heart of hearts. Granted, this is a judgment call. We should feel free to consult trusted friends, as Mary did, or perhaps a "discreet priest" to help us decide. Pray. Go with what gives you peace and a sense of freedom. Here's a modest, but mighty, current example of being vulnerable for God.

Last week, a person I shall not name became aware of a potential church project that clearly supports our mission but which is not covered by budgeted funds. After listening to a discussion of how the money might be raised, this person quietly handed me a check for the full amount. "You get to a certain age," this person said, "when you just don't see the point in going on about stuff and you just decide to take care of it."

That's certainly true, but many people get to certain age and decide their top priority is protecting their retirements. This person instead conceded some vulnerability, trusting that it was worth the risk that God's work might be done.

There's business as usual and then there's something new. With the beginning of the "Gospel Era" God is doing something new. Today's Gospel story, which is known as the Visitation, and Mary's Song, which follows, show a lot of newness.

First, this is a Bible story about a conversation between two named women. The only other instances I can think of in the Bible where two women converse are conflicts between rival wives of the same man. But here the Gospel-writer Luke is presenting us with something new – women as people in their own right, and women as allies for God and before God.

Then, the older woman defers to the younger one. This too is something new.

Finally, Mary begins to sing, of a lowly servant being raised up and blessed, of strength married to mercy, of the proud, mighty and rich being brought low. This is all something new. On top of this God's ancient promises to God's people, Mary says, are not just pretty metaphors, but are coming literally true in our midst, if we but have the eyes to see. This too is something new.

The season of Advent is reaching its climax. This is the season for something new for you and for me. If our highest priority has been keeping ourselves safe, perhaps the time has come for a little vulnerability. It's time to try something new.