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AMDG

Proper 4B - December 24, 2017

“Santa Claus isn’t the only one watching!” I saw that on a church marquee a few years back. And when I saw it I thought, “Yeah, that’s what we need at this time of year - a subtle reminder of a judge up in heaven scrutinizing our every move, keeping a list, and checking it twice!” I just shook my head in sadness - another image of God’s love as transactional. God as the great Santa Claus in the sky, doling out the gifts when we’re good and withholding them when we’re bad. It’s that kind of attitude that gives Christians such a bad name.

Remembering that message I see what a stark contrast it is with today’s Gospel, Luke’s story of the Annunciation. I spoken many times before about our relationship with God being transformational and not transactional. And we’re about ready to celebrate the great feast of transformational love - God sanctifying our human existence by becoming human in the form of Jesus. Luke’s story of how God approaches Mary to be the vessel for this great miracle is a beautiful model of how God’s love enters our lives, transforms us, and calls us into new relationship. It is the story of Mary’s prophetic call and our own. Of Mary’s call to witness, and our call to be Christ in the world. “Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.” Those are the first words Gabriel speaks to an amazed and unsuspecting Mary. They aren’t words of warning, or words of admonition; they are words of love and affirmation, and they’re so important they’re repeated a second time. “Don’t be afraid. You are God’s beloved.” Then comes the call, “And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High.” Notice Gabriel doesn’t say, God loves you, but if you don’t bear his son, he’ll reject you. He doesn’t say, if you be Jesus’ mother, there will be a nice present for you under the tree. No, Gabriel states the reality that Christ is within her. Notice, Mary’s initial response, she’s incredulous. “How can this be?” But, Gabriel presses on and shares the details of the miracle within her. He made Mary aware of the divine reality that I believe had always existed within her, that she was the

God-bearer. Meister Eckhart, the great medieval German mystic said, "Had not the Virgin first borne God spiritually, He would never have been born from her in bodily fashion." Mary, *like all of us* is the bearer of the Christ, God's eternal Word, existing before all things, and through who all things were made. That reality was in Mary and is in all of us. I like to imagine how Mary must have felt in that moment when she had the realization of the divinity within her...and then the Yes that followed. Her courageous acceptance, "Let it be. Just as you have said," was a courageous affirmation of the reality of her being. In Luke what follows today's passage is the story of how Mary visits her cousin Elizabeth, and there we have Mary's lovely song of affirmation, the *Magnificat*, which we read today. It perfectly expresses the wonder of Mary's relationship with God as well as our own - My soul Magnifies God. She speaks for all of us here - We magnify the Lord. We're not just images...we're magnified images. It's a reality we all carry within us. This story of the Annunciation should not be unfamiliar to us, because it is really our story. It depicts how God's extravagant and transformational love enters our lives. First, God approaches us and affirms our belovedness. As with Mary, it is often out of the blue. It can be experienced as a lightning bolt event, or a subtle awakening, and like Mary, we are perplexed, maybe even incredulous. But God persists, reminding us of God's extravagant love for us.

Then comes the call. God brings to our attention the reality that we carry his transformative love within us and beckons us to be that love in the world. This moment of call can be just as stunning as God's first revelation. It can also come as lightning bolt and also very subtly over time. If you think about those brief moments of clarity that have come your way in life - moments when a particular path has suddenly opened before you, or when a solution to a longtime dilemma suddenly seems obvious, or when you feel inexplicably drawn to carry out something that is difficult but still seems the right thing to do. Those times in life when we are not only awake enough to hear God's call, but have the courage to say yes, are what I'm talking about. Those calls persist, throughout our lives, they are part of the reality of our existence in God's love. We are called to accept the divine reality within us and give birth to it, constantly. And it may be growing within you, now. Perhaps

it's a change in career that keeps edging into your thoughts. Or maybe an injustice that has always bothered you and you feel called to make right. Or perhaps it's a relationship that you know you have to work to repair. It may not even be a particular activity or thing you are called to do, but rather something within you that longs to be healed. That call, as Mary experienced vividly in the message from Gabriel, is what God's transformative love brings into focus for us. It is Jesus' call to reconcile all things to God in love.

But there are many shrill voices in the world that try to deceive us into believing the childish concept of God which that marquee expressed - an exacting, punishing God, a God of rules, and lists, and of rewards and retribution. It is that Santa Claus God that Jesus tried so desperately to draw people's attention away from, an image of God's love that is not only distorted, but can be counter-productive. When we become overly fixated on following rules and avoiding God's punishment, caught in an imaginary transactional relationship, we miss the great miracle of our lives, we become blind to the transformative reality of God already in our lives. Too busy trying to erase our own sins we fail to recognize our blessedness, miss God's call to give birth to the Christ within us.

It's our Yes that brings that reality to life— Christ incarnate within each of us. A reality in which we are encouraged to try new things, to take risks, to open ourselves to new ways of experiencing God and what it means to be Church. That Yes enables us to be God's hand's in the world, realizing the blessings Mary sang. My prayer for us is that as a faith community and as individuals we will, like Mary, be able to joyfully proclaim with confidence - "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior... That we will be able to rejoice that God has worked through us to bring about God's reconciling love to the world. Showing the strength of his arm, and scattering the proud in their conceit. Casting down the mighty from their thrones, and lifting up the lowly. Filling the hungry with good things, and sending the rich away empty.

So, my friends, as we approach our great feast of Love Incarnate in the world, I want you to remember Mary, and her brave yes to God. Pray that we may have the courage to accept God's call to love, so we might join in Mary's song, knowing that as she bore within her the salvation of

the world, so do each of us in our own unique ways, bear the same Savior, who's triumphant love transforms the universe.