

## Feast of the Immaculate Conception - 2017

Ideas from The Rev. Dr. Kenneth Carter, Bishop of the Florida Conference of the United Methodist Church, headquartered in Lakeland, FL.

It is no accident that Mary takes center stage this time of year. Mary is venerated by some Christians, ignored by some Christians, and misunderstood by other Christians. At times Catholics have transformed the peasant Jewish teenage girl into an otherworldly Queen. At times Protestants and Evangelicals have pretended that she never existed, or they have missed the truth that she is the first disciple, that she displays radical faith and trust in God.

Mary hears the call of God and she responds. She models faith, obedience, servant hood, discipleship, and hospitality.

The Annunciation is the word of God, through the messenger, to Mary. *You have found favor with God. The power of the Holy Spirit will come upon you. You will give birth to the Savior.*

Mary asks, "How can this be?"

The angel/messenger said to her, "Nothing will be impossible with God."

The call of God is to an ordinary woman. It is the call to do something extraordinary. *Nothing will be impossible with God.*

There is a wonderful story about a man who was home with the children one afternoon while his wife went out Christmas shopping. He was reclining on the couch, half sleeping, half watching a football game, when the kids came into the room.

"Dad, we have a play to put on? Do you want to see it?"

He really didn't want to, but he knew he needed to, so he sat up, came out of his slumber, and became a one-man audience.

His four children, four, six, eight, ten years old, were the actors: Mary, Joseph, and the wise men. Joseph came in with a mop handle. Mary came in with a pillowcase under her pajamas; another child was an angel, flapping her arms as wings.

Finally the last child, the eight year old, came out, with all of the jewelry on that she could find in the house, her arms filled with three presents. "I am all three wise men," she said. "I bring three precious

gifts: gold, circumstance, and mud." (James Moore, Won't You Let Him In? An Advent Study For Adults, page 30)

The father didn't laugh. The father didn't correct the wise man. The father reflected on the word that somehow got to the heart of the Christmas story: God loves us for who we are, our gold--where we are at our best; our circumstances--where we might be even now, even our mud--where we are when we are most human.

God chose an ordinary human being--Mary--to be the vessel through which the Son of God would be born. What is impossible for us is possible with God. God can take our gold, our circumstance, our mud, and do something glorious with it.

This is the Annunciation, the disruptive call of God, for Mary, and, who knows, perhaps for you and me.

There is an ancient story that comes from the part of the world that is so contested now, the Middle East. A man was talking with a friend about his love life. "I thought I had found the perfect woman," he said. She was beautiful and had the most pleasing features a man could imagine. She was exceptional in every way, except she had no knowledge.

So I traveled further, and met a woman who was both beautiful and intelligent. But, alas, we could not communicate.

After further travels, I met a woman who had everything: a perfect mind, perfect intelligence, great beauty, all the features I was looking for, but...

"What happened?" asked the friend who was listening. "Why didn't you marry her at once?" "Ah well," he replied, "as luck would have it, she was looking for the perfect man." (Todd Outcalt, Candles In The Dark, page 225.)

The good news of the gospel is that when God begins to look for us, God is not looking for perfection. God chooses the ordinary. God loves the unlovable. In fact, God reverses just about every expectation we might have of how God would enter into this world and save it.