

Lord of Advent, in you all that ever was and is and shall be is made for shining. We rejoice in the brightness of your rising against all the dark days and we give you thanks for coming in timelessness to capture time by love. Amen.

Last week at the gym, I heard someone speaking loudly over in the corner. Any conversation is noticeable in our once-noisy and now very quiet gym and since weight lifting is extremely boring, eager for a diversion, I eavesdropped.

It was the janitor, who was talking to probably the most faithful, and also the oldest member, a good 85, if not older.

“Oh, I’m so glad I found you,” he said.

“I just couldn’t wait to see your beautiful smile. There it is! You’ve just made my whole morning.”

And then he went back to work.

Wow! He may be only a janitor in the eyes of the world but what a light he is to those around him.

This is the same guy who calls me “Young Lady” so I’m a big fan.

It just shows that no matter where you find yourself, if your work brings you purpose and energy, that will spill over into those around you. You have found your calling.

That incident reminded me of a time in my life, in my 20s and early 30s, when I was consumed with figuring out what my calling was.

I consulted reputable and not-so-reputable sources - spiritual advisors, palm readers, and tarot cards.

I threw I Ching coins, Foo Choo sticks, and sat with fear and trembling in front of Ouija boards.

What did I gain from all this?

The only concrete thing I can remember is that I was supposed to marry someone named Fred Grey.

That didn’t happen, at least not yet.

In fact, I think I spent so much time exploring and weighing options that I became almost paralyzed when I actually had to make a decision.

There are times in all of our lives when we might long for a prophet, particularly our own personal prophet to declare what our path should be.

These longings may be a continuous hum in the background of our lives or they may appear when we have a specific difficult decision to make.

Wouldn’t it be great if at moments like these, a messenger from God would appear.

“Henry,” the messenger might say, “sell half your company stock,

marry Ann Jones, move to Iowa and start a John Deere leasing company.”
Or sometimes we might settle for a more general response.
“Henry,” the messenger might say, “you’re OK and anything you decide is OK.”
It sounds very appealing.
We don’t have to take full responsibility for the decision.
God’s representative would certainly have our best interests at heart,
know our deepest desires better than we do,
and have a pretty good idea of what will happen in the future.

In the lesson from 2 Samuel this morning, God speaks to Nathan the prophet about King David who ruled Israel from about 1000 to 960 BCE.
The Gospel of Luke tells the story of the Annunciation, the Angel Gabriel’s visit to Mary.
Both David and Mary receive messages from God through messengers.
David was already well-acquainted with God’s messages.
Samuel, one of the last great judges in Israel, had been directed by God to select David as king, while he was still a young boy, caring for his father’s flocks.
The story we read today takes place soon after David becomes king.
Nathan announces to David that his throne will be established forever.
So a shepherd becomes a king.
Mary, although we aren’t told specifically about her background, probably had equally unremarkable origins.
But God sends Gabriel to tell her that she will give birth to God’s son.
So a young woman becomes the mother of the Messiah.
Both David and Mary receive good news, great news, David is to be king of God’s chosen people.
Not only will he be king but God promises him that his kingdom will last forever.
Mary is given the greatest possible honor.
God chooses her to bear and bring up God’s son.
But Mary and David also have choices – whether or not to accept God’s offers.
God never demands that either one of them conform to his will.
God’s offers are always given freely and our responses are also free.

David accepts God’s offer without hesitation.
Mary, on the other hand, perhaps wiser in the ways of the world than a shepherd, accepts only after some doubts and skepticism.
Gabriel greets her with, “Hail, O favored one, the Lord is with you.”
Mary is troubled.

She considers in her mind what sort of greeting this might be.
We react the same way when someone greets us with extra warmth.
It immediately arouses our suspicions and we wonder
whether they just want to borrow the car or are they asking for a loan?
Gabriel, seeing her mistrust, tells her
that she has been chosen by God for a great favor.
He then, apparently carried away by the importance of his message
and perhaps to make up for Mary's disappointing response,
waxes eloquent about this new opportunity.
Mary, still not wholly won over and not one to ignore practicalities,
questions the angel about the fact that she is to become a mother.
"How shall this be since I have no husband?" she asks.
The angel reassures her by declaring that all things are possible with God.

Although Mary takes longer to be convinced than David,
they both eventually agree to God's offer.
In fact, they go so far as to declare themselves God's servants.
David tells God,
"...the house of thy servant David will be established before thee."
Mary responds, "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord;
let it be to me according to your word."
There is such graciousness in both of their responses to God.

As I mentioned earlier, I've spent a lot of time
consulting various means about what I should do.
But when I became a serious Christian,
although it was still fun to throw Foo Choo sticks from time to time,
the real issue became what did God want me to do?
God has never come to me in visions or sounds.
It's more like God comes in a shift of consciousness, O! Now I see!
or an uneasy feeling that something is lacking.
I remember my sisters who nicely came to my ordination service.
A priest in the diocese preached and she talked about God's calls to us,
and specifically God calling me to be a priest.
My sisters said how grateful they were that God hadn't called them to be priests.
That's the last thing they wanted to do. But that's the point.
I don't believe that the God who loves us and created us
would ask us to do something that is counter to who we are.
Yes, God may ask us to step out and do something new,
something that is a stretch for us,

something that might even be very, very hard,
but it is inconsistent to imagine that God would ask something of us
that doesn't work with our gifts, with who we are.
God doesn't send angels and prophets these days
or speak from clouds or billowing smoke.
That kind of direct human-divine communication is very rare.
Our main access point for God these days is our ears. Listening.
The most honest and profitable listening is slow, quiet, prayerful
and this winter, while we are spending so much time at home,
we have a great opportunity to stop and listen.
How can we differentiate between God's call
and all the others calls in our lives
that may satisfy our well-meaning family and friends
but not our truest selves?
One of my favorite books on discernment, *Grounded in God*,
lists some very helpful signs for recognizing God's call.
There is a sense of peace in an authentic call.
A call from God might bring joy. It is persistent.
It bears fruit, maybe not immediately but over time.
Discernment involves paying attention to ourselves and to God.
Good questions to consider are: Where is my energy? What excites me?
What are my gifts and how can I use them?
In those wonderful words of Frederick Buechner,
"The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness
and the world's deep hunger meet."
It's a positive movement not a negative one.
Not, I've got to drag myself out of bed and go do something that I really dread but
O! I get to work with God on this.

God seems to have stopped appearing in burning bushes or pillars of fire
but those things have been more than made up for in the coming of Jesus.
We who live post 33 AD have been favored
with God's most powerful message of all –
Jesus, who in the words of Marcus Borg
showed us what a life full of God looks like.
Instead of occasional and unpredictable appearances by God
we are blessed with the continual mediation of Christ
and the continual presence and advocacy of the HS.
When we, like Mary, say yes to God, amazing things can.