Sermon on Advent 4 2015 (Lk 1:26-38)

At our Diocesan Parish Development School we learn that the place of disruption is the best possible place to embrace change.

Disruption isn’t easy in fact it’s dangerous; dangerous because we can be fixated on that which is being disrupted, e.g. we lose a job, we lose some sort of stability; a friend we’ve counted on moves away; maybe our kids leave home and we feel bereft of their companionship; maybe nothing has changed but the disruption we sense is that we thought going on this particular path would be good and instead it’s proving difficult. There are, of course, thousands of possible disruptions in our lives.

When we focus on the disruption, when we’re threatened by it personally and don’t see in it a possibility for change or growth we can slide into depression or give up on important goals.

On a national or even global level, disruption is the best possible place to embrace change but that opportunity is always twinned with the danger of national fear that, if pandered too, can lead to the different political disasters playing out around our world.

What of the disruption at the heart of our gospel reading today? Is it possible to see in this familiar story, the way God not only comes to us in the person of Jesus of Nazareth but how it is God continues to invite us into the possibilities for growth as people, as a community and as a world?

I think that answer is yes! But to say that we need to face several realities squarely; first, change is most possible when there is a disruption; second, God will sometimes precipitate a disruption or at least want to work with us through a disruption that is happening in our lives but caused by others, by evil or sin; and then the third thing is just to be honest that we try as people and as nations to push back against possible disruptions; that disruption is not considered a good but something, the possibility of which should be eliminated if at all possible.

If we’re willing to be honest in this way: we can read this story with fresh eyes and possibly look at our lives in a fresh way as well.

Even before we get into the heart of it, the story before us can be disruptive to us on an intellectual level; as the famous theologian Karl Barth said, here we’ve “come to one of the places…perhaps, *the* place, at which all times, and largely within the Christian community, offence has been taken.”

Many modern folk have felt that this story, summarized in our creeds with “conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary” implies childish attitudes about matters of sex in our Lord’s earthly beginnings; some saying the story denies Christ’s essential humanity or true womanhood to Mary.

If that applies to you, I’ll not try to persuade you to a more pious belief but celebrate the opportunity that offense provides! The Holy Spirit is good at turning stumbling blocks into stepping stones. What possibility is here for you?

For those of you who have no intellectual tangle with this story; how might it become disruptive for you? Maybe personal experience is a way in. Anybody have a daughter who became pregnant in a way that threatened her future? It happens. Anyone lay out a good plan that had every chance of succeeding only to have your best laid plan turn on you?”

So, as best we can, let’s allow our thoughts to be disrupted, let’s allow the scene itself to lead us into something very profound about our own existence!

Before the angel Gabriel drops the great disruptive bombshell, notice how God’s messenger greets Mary: “Greetings favoured one! The Lord is with you!” In Eugene Peterson’s translation “Good Morning! You’re beautiful with God’s beauty inside and out! God be with you.”

The Church has believed and calls all its members to believe that we share in this affirmation that God gives through Gabriel to Mary!

This is why, just to use just the example we have here in our own building, this scene has been painted in the thousands of different ways it has. In the painting in our personal prayer space Mary is painted at prayer in a Florencian villa, hundreds of miles and over a thousand years removed from her actual time and location.

The artist is saying “Mary isn’t just Mary!” rather, she’s a type of the Church; Mary as a representation of our truth, in whatever posture we find ourselves, addressed by God, not in harsh tones but in surprising grace, in surprising affirmation!

It is hearing God’s affirmation—if I might risk a judgement, most of us are not good at hearing affirmation—that prepares us to see in disruption, not just the danger, but the possibility.

The affirmation is so critical because what God wants to do with us; what God calls us to become, can be deeply perplexing! This because often God asks us to partner with others and the divine Spirit in ways that take us well beyond what we might pull off by our own ingenuity.

Ever tried loving your enemies; forgiving somebody 70 times 7; welcoming the stranger into your safety? All things God in Christ calls us to do and to become; things that are deeply contrarian to the cocooning, self-sufficiency that is propagated as “the good life.”

Mary’s perplexity registers on two levels; what role might a simple girl with no pedigree have to do with a son that is referred to by Gabriel in terms taken from the sum of all Israel’s hopes?

But she doesn’t broach that subject, instead she jumps in where angels fear to tread but she’s going to make this one go there! “How can this be since I am a virgin?”

The process of faith, the process of saying “yes” to God involves the space to ask questions, even difficult questions.

God is asking Mary to take a leap into the darkness of divinity; Mary figures that if God is asking her to bear a son God will look after getting her to the point of birthing that son even though an unwed pregnant woman might be subject to abuse, even death.

She’s not giving in to the initial fear but through her question and the Angel’s promises beginning to see the incredible possibilities in this life-changing disruption!

The Church exists to help its member participate fruitfully in God’s Mission; our mission is to help each other see the possibilities in the disruptions that happen. We can’t do that without growing in our faith, without asking each other hard questions and wrestling together with possible answers.

We find that in that, we are God’s messengers to one another!

It is this process that emboldens Mary’s famous *fiat mihi*  the words that from our human perspective save the world: “Let it be or with me according to your word.”

These are words that have been criticized as weak, spoken as they are in the passive tense. But let’s remember who’s saying them, a teenager willing to risk her honor and, in that culture, possibly her life, to bear God’s salvation.

She gives consent; she’s not being walked on; she’s not merely a receptive canvas upon whom gods and men inflict their designs, she’s an active partner in the world’s future hope!

She’s rising to her new calling as the one whom those who have faith down through the ages will call blessed.

One of the most beautiful things about saying “yes” to God is that once you open the door to possibility the implications and effects only deepen over time.

Many parishioners have told me over the years that saying yes to something small, being part of some sort of study, helping somebody in need, begin to tithe regularly, looking at a contemporary issue with fresh eyes, any of these and many more, set a trajectory that transformed their lives over time.

We see this in Mary’s own life as she ponders these things; it’s when she sees her cousin Elizabeth that some of the implications come spilling out in the Magnificat; a version of which we sang as our processional.

In all of this Mary’s “yes, may it be with, to me according to your word” is the faith of the Church, and it can be our faith!

This Advent we are given an opportunity, in this disruption, in any other disruption, on the eve of the event that changes everything, to ask “what change am I being led into?”

What does it mean to wrestle with the shape of things and bear Christ in my life? What does it mean to say “yes” to God’s words, however they come to me; maybe through a friend, a partner, sometimes even through an enemy!

In this Eucharist we are given the space to question, to weigh our choice.

In this Eucharist we invoke the same Holy Spirit that came upon Mary; the same Holy Spirit that made Mary’s words the words of cooperation with God, a cooperation that saved and will yet again, save the world.

The same Holy Spirit that makes our simple “yes” a word that changes our lives.