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Sermon

Advent IV

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It's some years back. I'm living in Portland and I'm driving to the cathedral for a meeting. As I drive along I'm immersed in feeling grumpy and out of sorts. And my thoughts are going right along with my feelings. Kind of like my thoughts are the engine of the train and my feelings are all the cars being pulled along behind. It seems like all I can see is worst case scenarios. It makes life seem very bleak indeed. ICK! Suddenly I'm fed up with it all and I take one step back and notice what I'm doing. I'm just like a Brio train plugging along on a single track that only goes where it goes. What if, I think, there's a parallel track or maybe even two or three which offer a different focus on my life. I imagine picking up the Brio train of my mind, lifting it off the dark and gloomy track it's on, to another track where things are lighter. Why not?! So I do it. And you know what? It works. I've pointed my energy and my thoughts and my feelings in a different direction, pointed them down the track that leads to the light and everything looks different. Wow! Aren't our minds so amazing? So powerful? And it's all in our hands. Up to us.. Up to us to make choices.

Which when you think about it is exactly what Mary did - she chose. Listen to Denise Levertov's poem Annunciation:

Annunciation Denise Levertov

We know the scene: the room, variously furnished,

almost always a lectern, a book; always
the tall lily.

Arrived on solemn grandeur of great wings,
the angelic ambassador, standing or hovering,
whom she acknowledges, a guest.

But we are told of meek obedience. No one mentions
courage.

The engendering Spirit
did not enter her without consent.
God waited.

She was free
to accept or to refuse, choice
integral to humanness.

Aren't there annunciations
of one sort or another
in most lives?

Some unwillingly
 undertake great destinies,
 enact them in sullen pride,
 uncomprehending.
 More often
 those moments
 when roads of light and storm
 open from darkness in a man or woman,
 are turned away from
 in dread, in a wave of weakness, in despair
 and with relief.
 Ordinary lives continue.
 God does not smite them.
 But the gates close, the pathway vanishes.

She had been a child who played, ate, slept
 like any other child - but unlike others,
 wept only for pity, laughed
 in joy not triumph.
 Compassion and intelligence
 fused in her, indivisible.

Called to a destiny more momentous
 than any in all of Time,
 she did not quail,
 only asked
 a simple, 'How can this be?'
 and gravely, courteously,
 took to heart the angel's reply,
 perceiving instantly
 the astounding ministry she was offered:

to bear in her womb
 Infinite weight and lightness; to carry
 in hidden, finite inwardness,
 nine months of Eternity; to contain
 in slender vase of being,
 the sum of power -
 in narrow flesh,
 the sum of light.
 Then bring to birth,
 push out into air, a Man-child
 needing, like any other,
 milk and love -

but who was God.

This was the moment no one speaks of,
when she could still refuse.

A breath unbreathed,
 Spirit,
 suspended,
 waiting.

She did not cry, 'I cannot. I am not worthy,'
Nor, 'I have not the strength.'
She did not submit with gritted teeth,
 raging, coerced.

Bravest of all humans,
 consent illumined her.

The room filled with its light,
the lily glowed in it,
 and the iridescent wings.

Consent,
 courage unparalleled,
opened her utterly.

Had we thought of that? That Mary chose? That she was not a passive receptor of a divine decision made without her consent? No, that's not how it was. We know that about our God - we are free to choose. Always. What will we choose? We know how John the Baptist chose. How Jesus chose. We know about them. We are their witnesses. And in our time, we too have choices to make. Sometimes they aren't the big momentous choices. They're not the ones like Mary's where the entire cosmos held its breath, waiting to see - which way would she go? What would her choice be?

No for us, it's often about the small moment by moment choices. Those times when we pick up the train of our thoughts and move our actions and our words from one track to another. So simple. So small. So potentially world-changing. And... so complicated. So complex. So huge. Right? Like all great and transformative shifts in who we are in the world, there is no end to the paradoxes and contradictions. Why does it have to be so difficult? Why can't it be more simple!

There's a book I recommend to you if you haven't already read it - The Book of Joy: Lasting Happiness in a Changing World. The authors Archbishop Desmond Tutu and His Holiness, the Dalai Lama share their own stories of adversity and struggle, the wisdom they each reaped from their super challenging journeys, and how we too can each cultivate more joy in our lives. Really it's a book about choices. The choices they made,

the choices they invite us to make too. As they tell us through this book, *“Adversity, illness, and death are real and inevitable. We chose whether to add to these unavoidable facts of life with the suffering that we create in our own minds and hearts... the chosen suffering. The more we make a different choice, to heal our own suffering, the more we can turn to others and help to address their suffering with the laughter-filled, tear-stained eyes of the heart. And the more we turn away from our self-regard to wipe the tears from the eyes of another, the more- incredibly- we are able to hear, to heal, and to transcend our own suffering. This is the true secret to joy.”*

May the joy and love of these who went before us - Mary, John the Baptist, Desmond Tutu, and those who are still going on before us - the Dalai Lama, and he who always walks with us - Jesus the Christ, inspire you to joy and love in your own life. And may all this joy and love infect you with the conviction that there is no better choice than to offer our hearts and our lives for the healing of our world.

Amen.