

“The Breath of Heaven Will Come Upon You”

Luke 1: 30-38

When I started planning out this sermon series for Advent a few months ago, I will tell you that this was the first scripture that I picked out, thinking that this would be the easiest of the sermons to write out because, let's face it: God has already done all the work. I keep thinking in the weeks leading up to this sermon that I would probably just talk about how Mary asks the angel how all this is going to happen to which I could say something like “Well, the Breath of Heaven can only enter our hearts like it did for Mary when we truly open them up to the possibilities of God. Sounds like a great sermon. Well this week, I was once again reminded that when we invite the Holy Spirit to be a part of our faithful conversations, it has a funny way of changing directions on us, very much like it did for Mary in our text. When she was asked how all this is going to happen, Mary was thinking biologically and the Holy Spirit was thinking theologically and that makes all the difference.

You see, I'm sure that in Mary's wildest dreams, she never imagined that she would be the one who would be called upon to bring forth the Son of God into this world. But that is exactly what happened. And through her experience with the Divine, Mary learns something about herself as well as learning something

wonderfully freeing about her God. Sometimes when God asks us to racially bend the arc of our lives away from where we thought we would go, we go somewhere we never dreamed or imagined we would. And like Mary with her experience, I am thankful God did the same with this sermon.

As I said at the beginning of the week, I thought this sermon would definitely be about opening ourselves up to God, just like Mary did but never did I imagine or realize or maybe want to acknowledge that the same invitation, the invitation to open ourselves up to God would also include a requirement to give ourselves over fully to God as well. Think about it.

when we take a look at Gabriel's response to Mary's question, Gabriel doesn't say anything about opening our hearts. Gabriel also doesn't say anything about making ourselves ready to receive God's grace and love. All Gabriel says is that "The Breath of Heaven will come over you. The power of the Most High will overshadow you therefore the child will be made holy."

Now when we really start to think about it, the angel's response is really kind of creepy. It makes me think of a bad horror movie, like this great big Blob is going to come oozing into the window and just overtake Mary. And unfortunately all Mary can do is sit and scream while this Blob slowly sucks her in, inch by inch until there is nothing left of Mary. As I kept thinking about Gabriel's response, I

just couldn't get this image of this Blob overtaking Mary until there was no visible trace of her left for people to find. Talk about disturbing!

I know our God has done some crazy stuff over the years but blob sucking seems a little extreme even for our God. But our text clearly says, "will come over your, will overshadow you." So if God is not a blob sucking Mary in, just what exactly is Luke talking about in this text?

So to help refresh my memory and hopefully to give me some more insight into this text, I went back and took another look at the definition of "overshadow". It means to cause something or someone to seem less important when compared to something or someone else. So yes, no blob sucking Mary in here but what does "Overshadow" mean for our text? How does "overshadowing" relate to Mary's wonderings about how all these things that God promised are going to happen? If God is not some big blob, then just exactly how is God going to overshadow Mary to bring forth new life?

For us to answer this question, we need to change our way of thinking, and reframe the situation a bit. We tend to think of the word overshadow in negative terms. We say things like, "That person's performance really overshadowed the rest of the play. No one would have known there was anybody else in that play if there hadn't been a program." Or we say things like that basketball player's

numbers really overshadowed the rest of his team's." Because when we use the word "overshadow" in these types of situations, we are trying to convey the idea that that particular person was a show off or was only looking out for her or his best interests and in no way took into account the concept of team player.

But as people of faith, that's not the type of situation we are talking about in our text. When Gabriel is telling Mary the power of the Most High will overshadow her, it is a good thing. And if truth be told, it is also a good thing for us to allow God to overshadow us as well. You see, When Gabriel is saying all this to Mary, he is letting her know that God will surround her with God's presence. God will cover her with God's peace and love. Gabriel is letting Mary know that when people look at Mary, they will not see Mary. They will see God reflecting out of her, reflecting out of her through all she says and all she does because she has given herself completely over to God.

I will tell you, at first glance, this idea of giving ourselves over completely to God scared me and yes it disturbed me as well. In our society, in our world, We are so used to thinking in terms of ourselves as individuals that this concept of willing letting go of our identities is completely foreign to us. As humans, we like to hold onto the concept that we are independent. We like to hold on to the concept that we are self-actualized, and self-reliant. We really don't like to think in terms of letting go of our identities and relying someone else. It is so much easier to rely

just on ourselves. In all our doings with others, We like to know who we are and to be honest, we like to know just exactly who other people are supposed to be as well. So in order to achieve this self-awareness, we place labels on people. Sure these labels define our relationships with others but they also restrict and prevent us from getting to know the other person on a level that is more than just surface deep. In our world, we never need to look beyond the labels. We can just go with the labels that define, and the labels do their job. They keep people away.

I will tell you that one of the reasons that I hoped this sermon would just be about opening our hearts and minds to God is because it is so much easier to deal with as a topic. It is comfortable for us as people of faith. I like thinking that I can let God into my heart but I am still in control or at least can still maintain the illusion that I have the power in my relationship with God. I like thinking that is up to my how much I let God into my life. I like thinking that it is up to me how much I let God into my heart, that it is still up to me how much I give myself over to God. Because if all we are really going to talk about letting God into our hearts and minds, I still can maintain that illusion of control.

But that's not how God works. When we really start looking at what God is asking of Mary and asking of us, to give ourselves over completely to God, God's response takes all that way and it leads us into uncomfortable territory.

But if we are being truthful, giving ourselves over to God completely is the whole purpose and point of our faith, not the faith where we still maintain our illusions but the faith that God requires from all of us.

As people of God, everything that we do, the words that we say, the prayers that we pray, the mission work that we do, even the very act of our worship each Sunday is a call to refocus our attention away from ourselves and refocus it on God. Our goal, our objective, the thing that we are constantly striving for as people of faith should be to make God be the center of our being.

As people of faith, Each and every day, we are called to reflect God's light and love through our words and actions so that anyone who meets us or has any relationship with us will not see us but will see God reflected through us. We are called to let the power of the most High overshadow us to the point where our lives reflect God and not ourselves. And that can't happen if we are still holding on to the labels that the world gives us or that we give to other, all because we want to keep people at a distance.

There is nothing about the Gospel that says that as we grow in faith, we should be becoming more aware of our own wants. In fact, it is quite the opposite. Everything about the Gospel of Jesus Christ tells us that when we give up the illusions that we are in control, when we give up the thinking that if we just keep

trying harder, we win. Everything about the Gospel of Jesus Christ tells us when we quit focusing so much of our attention on ourselves, we start to claim a new identity. Or let me say it another way, when we let go and let God, when we allow God to truly overshadow us, so much so that we become a beacon of light of God's love and grace for all people, then we truly take on our real identity, our actual identity, the identity that matters. When we allow God to overshadow us, we become who we were created to be: a child of God, claimed and named as one of God's very own and loved more than we could ever imagine.

That's what Luke is talking about in this text. He understands that a brush with heaven will change everything, including our identities. It transforms us and makes us aware of the Kingdom of God in our midst. Luke understands that an encounter with the Divine reveals who we really are. It reveals who we are called and created to be all along.

As people of faith, Once we've been overshadowed by God, we cannot go back to who we were before that experience and let's face it, we don't want to go back to that person we were before our encounter with the Divine. We are changed. We are transformed. We have become the person that God created us to be but have been afraid to be because of what people might say or what people might do to us if they knew who we really were.

You see, The thing that Mary realizes that we don't, all because we are too afraid of letting God in is that when God overshadows us, we don't lose ourselves. We gain ourselves. In that moment when the Breath of Heaven came upon Mary, she realizes who she was. She claimed the part of her true identity that really matters, the part that tells her each and every day she is a child of God, claimed, named and loved as God's very own.

And once she did that, she experienced a new beginning, a beginning that was holy, a beginning that was full of love, a beginning that was full of grace, a beginning that brought for new life for both her and the world. With this new beginning, Mary was gaining her freedom, a freedom that allowed her to come together and be caught up in the great ways of God, a freedom that opened her eyes to the Kingdom of God in her midst, a freedom that opened her heart to the abundance of God's grace and love that is readily available for all of God's children, a freedom that turned our world upside down and inside out and made everything right once more. In her encounter with the Divine, by allowing God to fully overshadow her, Mary gained a freedom that this world can never take away. She knew that no matter what, no matter what the world might say about her, no matter what the world might do to her, she was loved more than she could ever imagine. And that was all that really mattered.

Mary understood that God wasn't going to overshadow Mary to remove any trace of her. Rather, God was going to overshadow Mary as a way to begin a new partnership with God, a partnership that is not based on Mary's wants but based on God's desire for people to live together in justice, peace, grace and love. God was going to overshadow Mary so that the world would be radically changed and set free.

And that is exactly the same invitation that is being extended to us as well as people of God, to encounter the Divine and be transformed. Today and all days, God is promising to overshadow us if we would only let God. The power of the Most High is waiting to overshadow us, not so that we lose our identity but so that we will be set free. God is waiting to overshadow us so that the Kingdom of God will come to new life in us and in our world today.

When we think about it, when we think about God's invitation to overshadow us completely, it is not scary or disturbing. It is really rather exciting. It is exactly what we have been hoping for and asking to happen all along. We have been praying for God to come and be with us. We have been praying for God to come and set things right once more. We have been praying for the world to know God's love once more. And the only way this can happen, is if we allow God to overshadow us completely.

What Mary discovers and what we are learning as well, is that we are called to let the power of the Most High overshadow us to the point where our lives no longer reflect our wants, no longer reflects just the labels placed upon by this world. We are called to let the power of the Most High overshadow our lives to the point that all people see and experience through us is God and God's love.

Now let me stop right there and say something. We tend to imagine that Mary was just sitting there passively while the angel was speaking. And that couldn't be further from the truth. Mary was taking part in this exchange as well. She had the choice to say yes to God's request. If Mary had said no thank you, then God would have had to come up with another plan. But she didn't thankfully for us and for all of creation.

After all that Gabriel says, Mary doesn't go running screaming from the room. She doesn't say, You can't be serious. She doesn't even ask where the cameras are to make sure that she is not falling victim to some practical joke.

Mary simply says let it be unto me, according to God's world. She knew that God has promised a new beginning for God's people. She knew that God had never left God's people. And more importantly, she knew that God was still working in the world and was asking for her help.

In this wonderful transforming moment with Mary, God isn't just promising a baby. God is promising a new beginning for her and for all of God's creation! God is promising a partnership that will radically change our lives for the better. God is promising to come and drench us with God's presence so that the world will know that God loves us all more than we could ever imagine. In this wonderfully freeing moment for all of God's creation, God is promising to help us to become more than just who the world says we are. God is promising to help shape us into becoming the person God created us to be.

Today, we are called to say to the world, that There is a different way, a way that doesn't confine us, or restrict us but a way that frees us, that allows us to live out of abundance of the Kingdom of God. And that way is by allowing God to overshadow us so that we can claim our real identity, as children of God loved more than we could ever imagine. There is another way for us to be in relationship with God and with one another. It is not a way based on power or might. It is not a way based on losing our identity. It is a way that transforms us through love and grace. It is a way that once we've experience it, we never want to go back to the way things used to be before we experience the Divine.

It is a way of love. It is a way of grace. It is a way of hope. It is a way of peace. It is God's way. And all it takes from us to be a part of this new, this new beginning is one simple word: yes.

We need to say yes to God. God is asking us today to allow God to come and overshadow us for the simple reason that sometimes the only Christ people see is the Christ that lives in you and me.

May we give ourselves over to God completely. May the power of the Most High overshadow us and may we always remember that the only hope of glory is the Christ in you and me. Amen.