

Accepting  
Isaiah 1:1-4, 8  
Luke 1: 26-38

The theme of the second Sunday of Advent is Accepting. In the lives of Isaiah and Mary it is an accepting of God's call, for Isaiah God's call was to be a prophet, not just a priest, for Mary the call was to bear the son of God.

But I also want to talk about another kind of acceptance, the grace to accept what life brings, to accept life as it is, not as we wish it to be. Both kinds require courage and faith and both bring peace.

I

The call came to Isaiah in the temple of Jerusalem. It came through a vision given him in a time of national emergency: "In the year that King Uzziah died." These verses capture one of the most overwhelming visions in the Bible: the Lord sitting on a throne high and lifted up; the very hem of God's robe filling the temple; the strange six-winged angelic creatures flying above the throne singing, "Holy, holy, holy. The whole world is full of God's glory."

In the presence of the Holy One Isaiah senses his unworthiness and that of the nation: "I am a man of unclean lips and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips." Then his lips are cleansed, and then the call: "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?"

Now the acceptance: Isaiah said, “Here am I; send me.” Isaiah was a priest in God’s temple, but now he was being called to be a prophet, one who spoke forth God’s word. Sometimes he as a prophet brought hard words from God; other times words of hope and comfort.

Hard words like these:

Enough of your worship services,  
your pot-luck dinners, your offerings  
your songs.

Wash yourselves,  
make yourselves clean  
remove the evil of your doings  
from before my eyes.

Cease to do evil  
learn to do good.

Seek justice  
rescue the oppressed  
defend the orphan, plead for  
the widow.

Sydney Harris, a columnist from years ago wrote: God could do with less praise and more imitation. Preachers who preach such sermons are often not invited back to preach.

But Isaiah brought words of hope and comfort too, words to a nation in crisis:

The people who walk in darkness

have seen a great light....

For unto us a child is born, unto

us a son is given....

The wolf will lie down with

the lamb

and the leopard with a kid,

calf and lion and fatling

will lie down together....

They will not hurt or destroy

on all my holy mountain.

These are glorious visions by which to live. Isaiah was a priest who became a prophet and a prophet who was always a priest. What God showed him, he spoke. Like Julian of Norwich who called God's visions "Showings" and gave us this one:

All shall be well  
and all shall be well  
all manner of things shall be well.

Such was the vision given to Isaiah to help them through their national ordeal.

O, tidings of comfort and joy,  
comfort and joy.

## II

Now the scene shifts from the temple in Jerusalem to a tiny town in Galilee. We call it the Annunciation, or Announcement. We should also call it The Call of Mary.

There is Mary, a young teen-aged girl, and there is the angel Gabriel. Paintings of the scene shimmer with gold.

Gabriel greeted her with these words. "Greeting, favored one. Do not be afraid, for you have found favor with God."

You will conceive in your womb  
and bear a child.

His name will be Jesus.

"How can this be?" Mary asked.

The angel answered.

The Holy Spirit will come upon you  
and the power of the Most High  
will overshadow you. The  
child you will bear will be a holy child,  
the son of God.

And now Mary's words of Acceptance:

Here am I, a servant of the Lord;  
let it be to me according to your word.

"Here I am", said Isaiah, said Mary. Let it be.

Frederick Buechner captured the scene through the eyes of the angel:

She struck the angel Gabriel as hardly old enough to have a child, let alone this child, but he'd been entrusted with a message to give her, and he gave it.

He told her what the child was to be named, and who he was to be, and something of the mystery that was to come upon her. "You mustn't be afraid, "Mary", he said.

As he said it, he only hoped she wouldn't notice that beneath the great, golden wings he himself was trembling with fear to think that the whole future of creation hung now on the answer of a girl.<sup>1</sup>

We might miss as we see this overwhelming scene again the courage of her acceptance, what the poet Denise Levertov called "the courage of her consent." And the danger she feared, a young unmarried teenager who could have been accused of adultery and stoned to death, she and the child in her womb, but for Joseph standing behind her and with her, saving both mother and child.

Under the hugeness of this encounter with the angel and the magnitude of the decision Mary had to make, we might wonder how *we* might fit in. Our callings and acceptings do not come with world-changing significance. But they have more significance than we can know. The little daily callings: go visit, go stand with, go love. God nudges, and we say with Mary: "Here I am. Let it be."

There was woman in my last church who led an organization which collected unused food from restaurants and grocery stores and distributed it to the hungry. One day she had a station wagon full of dozens of Krispy Kreme donuts to deliver. On her way, she stopped by the Bank of America Building to see an executive on the top floor to enlist him in her effort.

As she rode the elevator to the top, the person next to her in the elevator said, “You smell like donuts!” Paul talks about our being “the aroma of Christ,” drawing the world to Christ by our love. She was the aroma of Christ that day.

When we see the enormity of the problems facing the world we may say, “What difference can I really make? But the world, as one has described it, is like a great spider’s web. You touch one part of it and the whole web trembles. A man hauling stones in 12<sup>th</sup> century France was helping build a cathedral he would not see finished. It would take over 100 years to complete.

The theologian Reinhold Niebuhr wrote: “Nothing worth doing can be achieved in a lifetime; therefore, we are saved by hope.” None of us, he went on, know fully the meaning of what we do, nor can we predict the results; therefore we are saved by faith. Nothing however good can be accomplished alone, he said; therefore, we are saved by love.

We walk in hope, we walk in faith. We walk together.

### III

Now let’s move into another more personal realm of “accepting”. It has to do with the accepting of what life brings to us, accepting life as it is, not as we would wish it to be.

It is like the acceptance which is the last (not first) stage of grieving. To use Kubler-Ross' five stages: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, then acceptance. And not always in that neat order.

It has to do with the acceptance at the heart of the Recovery and A.A. movement. We acknowledge our powerlessness and reach out to a Higher Power. It is the acceptance of the Serenity Prayer:

God grant us the serenity to accept the things we cannot change,  
the courage to change the things we can,  
and wisdom to know the difference.

We may need to talk about some terrible theology surrounding the phrase: "Accepting the Will of God." Often the "Will of God" is attached to some tragedy or misfortune. Why is it that the "Will of God" is so often spoken of in the context of suffering and death?

While he was the minister of the Riverside Church in New York City, William Sloane Coffin suffered the death of his young adult son Alex, who drove his car off of a bridge into Boston Harbor and drowned. A couple of days later a well-meaning woman came into his apartment carrying an armful of quiches. As she passed him she said, "I just don't understand the Will of God." Coffin flew after her and said, "I'll say you don't!" Later he said, "I needed the anger and she



needed the instruction.” God’s hand, he said to her, was not on the steering wheel that day.

Later, in his first sermon back after Alex’s death, he said,

When the waves covered over the sinking car, God’s heart was the first of all of our hearts to break.

The God of Jesus is not the great Controller of the Universe, but the God of all love drawing us by the Divine Love to God and weeping with us when we suffer.

Write these words on your heart, Matthew 18: 14:

It is not the will of my Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish.

God’s will is not some fixed plan that determines all that happens. It is the reconciliation of the world. Paul said that Jesus made known the mystery of God’s plan: to unite all things. God’s will is peace.

One of the two words for God’s will in the gospels is a beautiful word, *eudekia*, good pleasure. In Luke Jesus says, “Fear not, little flock, it is the Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom.”

The Abba of Jesus is not the controller of all that is, but the God who is always working for the good. As Paul wrote,

We know that in everything (everything!) God works for good with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose. (Romans 8:28).

Acceptance is the recognition of life as it is, not as we would want it to be and placing our lives in the hands of God who is at work for the good.

Acceptance is finally recognizing our need and the willingness to say those hard words: “I need help”.

On the night before his death on a Roman cross, Jesus prayed this honest prayer:

Abba, Father,  
for you all things are possible  
remove this cup.

He did not want to die. But then came the acceptance.

Not my will, your will.

He was placing his life into the hands of God and into the unknown. He did not, could not have known what would happen, but he trusted in the goodness of his Abba.

I have faced, we all have faced, bitter moments of defeat, life's reversals, deepest disappointment, loss and grief. There have been times of denial, anger, bargaining, and depression. The road to recovery is never easy. *But there comes acceptance.*

We've let go. We've joined our hands to hands better than ours, the hands of our Abba who is at work with us for our good.

May we all be given this grace today.

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1. Frederick Buechner, *Peculiar Treasures* (N.Y.: Harper & Row, 1979),39.