

Mary of Nazareth (Advent 1)
Luke 1:26-38 & Isaiah 11:1-9
November 28, 2021
First Presbyterian, Luling

At my first church as an ordained minister, I found the following quote, tucked in the desk drawer. It had been put there by my predecessor, a Christian Educator with years and years of experience, one of those people able to pull a Bible study out of her hat with five minutes notice. She could simultaneously entertain the elementary school crowd while supervising the youth group as they cooked a church supper in the kitchen. Church Wonder Woman, essentially. This was the quote she left in the desk for the next person who would use it—it wasn't directed to me in particular, just to whoever would be her successor.

It was in her handwriting on an index card. It read "God does not call the equipped. God equips the called." "God does not call the equipped. God equips the called."

She seemed a very well equipped person to me, so God had clearly done a thorough job of equipping her for the role God had called her to do. I felt simultaneously well equipped and completely unequipped, myself. As I gained more experience, it became clear where I was not equipped and needed some significant divine intervention.

The more experience in ministry and in life I gain, I think the more aware I am of where I need more equipping, where my gaps and lacks are. I don't take much time to pat myself on the back when I do feel equipped, but I'm all quick to acknowledge those places and times and areas where God needs to get to work, pronto.

All in all, I take comfort in the idea that God called me not because I fit into a certain category or qualified in some way, but that, having called me, God has been in the process of equipping me, and I don't expect that process will ever be concluded.

God didn't send Mary a message on an index card in a desk drawer. Of course, she was called to a far greater mission than I have been. God sent kind of the same message, though, in the form of the angel Gabriel.

Greetings, favored one, Gabriel says. More literally—Greetings, grace-filled one! While this sounds like Mary may already be equipped for her calling, if she is already filled with grace, if she is already favored, then that is not of her doing. That's God's doing, already equipping her, filling her with grace, filling her with the strength and wherewithal she will need to even hear and understand Gabriel's message. So if she is already equipped and qualified, it's God's doing and not hers. Grace comes from God, and in this case, grace comes from God to fill Mary. Gabriel says as much, in the next sentence: God is with you.

God is with Mary. God is equipping Mary, even as Gabriel is speaking.

Mary may be in the midst of being called. And God may be in the process of equipping her for her mission. But she's still uncertain. "Much perplexed," Luke tells us. She ponders, as she will do several more times as her calling and equipping unfolds.

Gabriel continues on with his message for Mary. The most astounding message any angel had ever been expected to deliver. You will conceive and bear a son and you'll name him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most of High. Of his kingdom there will be no end. Mary asks the obvious question: "How?" "How can I be equipped for such a thing? I'm not qualified, I'm not yet married, this is going to cause all kinds of problems."

Gabriel's answer to her "How" question is essentially: God will equip you. He tells her "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and therefore the child to be born will be holy." God will take care of it. The Holy Spirit will be present with you and within you, and you will be being equipped to carry out this mission to which God is calling you.

At this point in the interaction, I'm pretty blown away by Mary. I would have been overcome by doubts and questions and fear. I don't know how I could have said yes. I would never have felt like I was equipped, or could be equipped, even if I had faith that God would be in charge of the equipping. But if she has those doubts and fears, Mary is able to set them aside quickly and firmly. "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Mary is able to say, "Though I may feel unqualified and unequipped, I trust God and have faith that God can equip me to carry this Son of the Most High, and be his mother." God equips the called.

It may be that Mary had more faith than we do. But I'm not sure about that. It may simply be that we don't recognize the equipping that God is doing in our lives as well and as easily as Mary did. Mary believed and saw that God, even as she was being asked and answering Gabriel's question, was already in the process of equipping her. I think we are not as careful and observant listeners as Mary was.

Here's an example of what I mean. A pastor acquaintance shared a story this week, what could have been a pretty ordinary story. She had created a barn door for her church's Christmas pageant, by painting a rustic barn door onto a completely ordinary and boring old classroom door that had been stuffed in a dusty storage closet for who knows how long. It looks just like a barn door and nothing like an old church classroom door. This is something I am not equipped to do, for sure. Nor have I ever been asked to do something like that. But she was equipped. Eighteen years earlier, she'd worked on sets at a community theater and learned this very thing: how to make a smooth piece of wood look like a barn door. She concluded this story by saying, "God prepares pastors in the strangest ways."

God was equipping her, in ways she surely did not recognize at the time, to be the pastor this particular church needed her to be at this particular time. Sure, it doesn't sound like a significant calling when you compare it to Mary's, but her recognition of this divine preparation puts her in tune with Mary.

I hope you can see that divine equipping in your own life. Maybe something in your childhood, or your work history, or your friendships. Something in your past, seen from the perspective of time, was an equipping for something God would call you to do later.

God does not call the equipped. God equips the called. God equips us with grace and generosity, over the long haul, in surprising and strange ways. Let us say "Here am I, the servant of the Lord. Let it be with me according to your word."