



# CHRIST CHURCH CRANBROOK

***Here Am I - The Fourth Sunday of Advent - 12202020***

In the name of the loving, liberating, and life-giving God. Amen.

Do you believe that one person can make a difference in this world? And secondly, and perhaps more importantly, do you believe that that person is you? And if you hesitate at all at that question, if it perplexes you in any way, you're not alone. Maybe it's a bit of seasonal affective disorder, but watching the news these days and seeing the challenges we face night after night, I sometimes wonder myself.

Not just from this pandemic, of course, but from the countless epidemics that have plagued us for too long: homelessness, poverty, racism, systemic injustice of all kinds, loneliness, depression, teen suicide. The list goes on and on. Not to mention our politics, right? The very mechanism for which we are supposed to be able to come together to solve these problems, it too seems utterly broken.

It can be overwhelming sometimes, can't it? It can be discouraging. It can make us doubt whether we can really make a difference when we face problems so numerous and so big. It can cause us to become jaded even, and become indifferent towards one another. It can even cause us to take a pass when opportunities to help come our way. And they come all the time, don't they? Whether it's helping a stranger who is struggling to unload their car, visiting someone that we know could really use it, volunteering at that toy drive or passing someone on the side of the road who's having car trouble. It's so easy in those moments to say, well, certainly someone will help. Why does it need to be me?

We come up with all kinds of excuses to get ourselves off the hook. Don't we? Well, certainly they must have a cell phone. Certainly they must have AAA. Certainly someone else has signed up for it. Besides what difference would just one more person make? I'd probably just be getting in the way. Maybe we should leave this to the professionals. Besides, I'm running late. I need to get to that thing.

In economics, we call it the tragedy of the commons. In environmental circles, it's referred to as the paradox of inaction. They are each attempts to describe the human tendency to sit idly by in the face of suffering. To talk ourselves out of making a difference to leave it to someone else, to not get

involved because after all, what can one person do? The paradox, of course, is that we know small acts of courage and compassion when added together can have great consequence. They can change everything. And yet, despite that knowledge, we too often fail to act. We take a pass and sometimes with tragic consequence.

I came upon a news report last year, when a security camera outside of a building happened to catch and record a homeless man lying on the sidewalk early in the morning, face down, bleeding. And the camera recorded him lying there for more than an hour as one person after another, passed him by on the sidewalk, practically happy having to step over him as they walked by. No one bothering to stop, no one even bothering to call 911. Eventually the police spotted him, but by then it was too late. Hugo Tale-Yax had bled to death at the age of 30, in plain view of a city who had taken a pass on his humanity and on their own,

When interviewed the following day, neighbors said they had heard the commotion, but they just didn't think it was serious. Others said that it was all too common to see homeless people lying on the ground. They just didn't think anything of it. Others said they didn't want to get involved. That's what we pay our taxes for, isn't it? Why don't the professionals handle this sort of thing? You've probably seen such incidents yourself on the news or perhaps in your own life. They are occasions when sometimes the most inconsequential act could have made all the difference. If we had just been willing to stare fear and doubt in the face and to say to God, here am I.

Celebrated anthropologist and the Episcopalian, Margaret Mead, having spent her lifetime studying human culture around the globe, nevertheless, saw hope for our species when she famously said, "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has."

That quote came to my mind as I reflected on today's gospel known as The Annunciation. It's been called one of the most extensively depicted events in human religious history. It's been immortalized and re-imagined in countless frescoes and icons, murals and stained glass windows. It's inspired enumerable prayers and hymns, sermons and devotional practices. In fact, it's so iconic that it may be hard to relate to today. But for me, The Annunciation points us to an everyday truth that God comes into this world, not through mythic demigods and archangels, but through the lives of everyday, average people like you and me.

Notice, there's not a single quality of Mary mentioned by Luke. She's not described as being especially faithful or righteous or worthy. She's not described as being smart or well educated, certainly not wealthy or powerful. In fact, she's just the opposite, right? An ordinary teenage girl. No apparent means

to even support herself, engaged to a carpenter, living in a backwater town a little north of nowhere. Yet, she was favored. But as Richard Rohr points out, being favored actually says very little about the one being favored and everything about the one doing the favoring.

The Greek word translated as "favored" means undeserved, unmerited, that which is bestowed freely upon. In other words, it's not referring to Mary's virtues, but to God's grace, Mary says as much to herself in her response to all of this in the Magnificat, which we just heard beautifully sung a moment ago, when she begins her praise by proclaiming to God, you loved me in my lowliness, in my lowness, in my low stature, or my littleness as it is sometimes translated.

Mary's humility echoes the response of Abraham and Moses and countless others throughout scripture, whose initial response to God is also one of surprise and disbelief. Who me? Surely you don't mean me. And how is any of this going to be possible anyway? Have you heard those doubts in your own life? Have you ever felt inadequate to the task that God had put before you?

I know it was my response when someone suggested I go to seminary, who me? Clearly, you don't know me very well. And besides how would any of this be possibly? I have mountains of student loans from law school. I have a mortgage. How would any of this even work?

The enunciation points us, not just to a pattern throughout scripture, but to the pattern of our own lives. God will surprise us and we will be perplexed and confused when he does, and we very likely will doubt ourselves. That's all normal. That's the way it's supposed to go. The key and the message I hear today is to not give into the doubts, but to trust through them, to trust past them, to leave the details of how to God and instead focus on our response and say in the face of fear and doubt, in the face of our own shortcomings, our own faults, our inadequacies, even our own sins, Lord, here am I.

It's been God's pattern throughout human history, as Margaret Mead observed. God is born into this world through the everyday, the ordinary, and the flawed, but those who have the courage to say yes. In that way, Mary is a stand-in for all of us. And like Mary, we too are favored. We too are bestowed with God's undeserving love not when we act, by the way, not when we act, but so that we would have the courage to.

Hugo Tale-Yax had such courage because if you were to rewind that security camera footage back just a bit further from the scene I had described, we would have seen that Hugo was not just a victim of the world's indifference. It turns out he was also someone's savior. Before Hugo was found by the police, the security camera showed a young woman being accosted by an unknown assailant, again, as cars drove by and took no interest. But as the recording shows Hugo coming out of nowhere to help, managed to distract that assailant long enough so that

that one young woman could get away. But in the scuffle that followed, he was left wounded on the sidewalk.

Hugo had no funeral. There was no makeshift memorial on the spot where he had given his life to save someone else's. His face does not appear in stained glass windows. No hymns have been sung of his deeds. And yet this undocumented homeless man found his way home into the mansion God prepared for him, where he shares company today with Mary and all the communion of saints who each in their own way said in the face of doubt and fear, Lord, here I am.

Do you believe that one person can make a difference? And do you believe that one person is you? As we journey to the manger once more, may we believe and may we seek to once again and be surprised by a God who favors each of us. And may we have Mary's courage when we are so that together we might give birth to a new world where the meek are exalted, where the hungry are filled, where the lonely are loved, and the lost are found, because nothing will be impossible with God.

Amen.

[End of Recording]