

Today we will bestow a sendoff blessing on Nora Shuman-Moore, who is soon on her way to Thailand with the Peace Corps.

She is not much older than Mary was when she received the blessing from the angel and began her own memorable adventure.

Maybe Nora will come home pregnant ... in which case, her parents will surely rejoice and say, "this is the work of the Lord."

Or maybe not.

What is far more likely is that Nora will return with something new inside of her, something that wasn't there before, a stirring, an awareness, a seed of wisdom and possibility, a fresh trajectory for the rest of her life, something we pray will be cause for those around her to call her blessed.

There is a good chance of this, because Nora shares with a Mary a beautiful trait: she shares her startling and marvelous openness.

Nora signed up for the Peace Corps with the chance to be assigned anywhere in the world, a servant ready to be sent wherever.

This requires a courage that few of us can muster, a rare and exquisite kind of courage the church likes to call *faith*.

We undersell this word when we use it as a name for concepts we believe or doctrines we accept.

It has far less to do with the categories of the mind that it does with the courage of the heart, the trust in the gut that swallows the gulp in the throat and pushes out the word yes.

Faith says *let it be with me according to your word* to a God who first speaks strange and sometimes quite unbelievable things.

Most of us prefer to do the talking ourselves, to generate the ideas and tell others what to do and how and when to do it.

Most of us like to craft the plans and announce them to others, including God, and we wait to see whether God will answer our prayers, which is to say, do what we want.

Precious few of us go to the Peace Corps or knock on the angel's office door and say, send me wherever; *let it be with me according to your word*.

There is good reason for this.

It is not just our standard idolatry and power lust that cause us to balk at such obedient compliance; it is also our healthy, wise distrust of the idolatry and power lust of others.

Unquestioned acceptance of the word of angels can be blamed for all manner of violence and horror; it is the flammable fuel for atrocities of religion that are anything but good news or the will of God.

We must ask questions.

We should be perplexed more than we are certain, and we should dare to ponder.

That is the activity and the responsibility of faith.

Questions, uncertainties and doubts do not diminish faith, they strengthen it.

Any God who can't handle them is too much of a wimp to be worshiped.

Speak your mind; talk back to the angel; engage God in real conversation.

But don't be surprised if it doesn't turn out the way you expect, because God has free will too,

and your own mind and heart and life might change, and that is why the conversation requires courage, why faith is such a risky enterprise.

King David shared his thoughts with God, and the prophet signed off on them, speaking the words of an angel, *The Lord is with you.*

But the prophet also basically said, let it be with God according to your word, and that part didn't fly.

It is not because it was a bad word, either.

David recognized in the peace and stability he enjoyed that he lived in a mansion while God camped in a tent, which struck him as terrible architectural theology.

David resolved to honor God with a house of cedar...except that God vetoed the plan.

God chose instead to build David himself into a house, a living lineage in which God would dwell, ultimately pitching tent in human flesh carried in the womb of a woman who would come into his family tree a thousand years later.

By then, she would not be royalty or even rich.

She would not be a great house of cedar but a tiny teenage tent of scandal and skin.

It is an odd choice from a God who makes lots of odd choices, including the choice, thanks be, to keep faithfully enduring and embracing us, faithfully, courageously continuing to engage us in relationship despite our distracted self-centeredness and maddeningly fickle inconsistency.

This God chooses oddly to approach us from the underside of history, from a tent in the desert, from a teenager in a small town, from a table set with basic bread and wine for a weirdly open and undistinguished guest list.

This God's patterns are hard to predict:

sometimes like Mary you are the one, sometimes like David you are not.

Many women long to have a child and never will.

Many men long to build a house and a name and a legacy and never will.

The stories of Scripture, so peculiar and so particular, can become painful reminders of dreams that don't ever come true, plans and pregnancies dashed, possibilities open to others but closed to us.

Why does God allow such inconsistency?

What are the mechanics of divine mercy and justice?

How can this be?

So many of our questions, like Mary's, do not receive direct or satisfying answers.

We ask for what and how and why, and instead we are given who.

*The Holy Spirit will come.*

*Your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son.*

*The Lord is with you.*

You have companions, human and divine; you are not alone.

It may not be the companions you would select any more than Thailand would have been the country Nora chose first, but there are unique gifts and blessings in whatever assignment you get.

God is perplexing, and the first response of faith is to ponder, to ask, to enter into the confusion and then ultimately place the sure but scary bet that God knows what God is doing, to listen carefully and then say, whether because of what you have heard or in spite of it, *let it be with me according to your word.*

I have no idea what Nora is in for far across the world, and more than I have any idea what any of us are in for in the uncharted frontier that is tomorrow.

All I can tell you is that she is favored, that you are blessed, that *the Lord is with you*.

That may or may not be obvious, but it is true.

That may or may not feel like good news, but it is.

God knows your plans and also knows possibilities within you that you cannot reach yourself.

God hears your prayers, your praise, your questions and your intentions; and while God may or may not give full answers or approval, God does favor you.

It is why God has continued throughout history to chase you, to come with prophets and angels, in tents and in temples, sanctuaries and street corners, stories and songs, word and breath, wine and bread, and then, in the ultimate surprise, in a barn in backwater Bethlehem wearing our skin and our story as astonished angels sing to perplexed and petrified shepherds, heaven to humanity:

Greetings, favored ones.

The Lord is with *you*.