

## ADVENT FOUR, YEAR B. DECEMBER 20, 2020

Did you ever wonder what the etymology of the word serendipity is? It was originated by Horace Walpole in 1754 who used it in a letter to tell a friend about a Persian fairy tale. The fairy tale was called "The Three Princes of Serendip." The ancient story told of three princes from the island of Ceylon, which was originally called Serendip. The princes set out on a pursuit of great treasures. They never found what they searched for, but in route they were continually surprised by unanticipated delights. While looking for one thing, they found another by accident. The story touched Horace because what he had discovered from the tale was a thrilling approach to life. It was about enjoying the unexpected.

Using the original name of the island, Serendip, Walpole coined the word serendipity. From that day on, he believed the most significant and valuable experiences were those that happened to him when he least expected them.

Serendipity occurs when something beautiful breaks into the normal routine of our lives, bringing new vitality and joy. It is so totally unexpected, and because of it, life will never be the same again.

Our God is a god of serendipities, doing new things, often at times when we least expect them. Our lives might be in a rut or we might be frustrated and worn out from some difficult turns our lives may have taken. Then suddenly, often quite unexpectedly, a new thing happens, and it changes our lives forever.

In today's gospel we learn of God's serendipity. Mary, a teenager at the time of her engagement to Joseph is totally taken by surprise, as God's messenger Gabriel speaks directly to her one day. The messenger shocks her nearly to death by telling her that she is God's favored one; she is going to give birth to the Messiah; she is going to name him Jesus (in Hebrew, Joshua meaning "God will save")! If we were to interview Mary today, and ask her whether this was part of her plan; whether she was expecting such a visitor, with such a message, do you think, for even one second, that she'd answer us with a "Yes"? I don't think so! Mary came to learn that God works in serendipitous ways that often upsets our own carefully laid out plans.

What about us? Do we think God works in serendipitous ways? We live in an age where we talk about all the choices we have, and about how it is up to each of us to choose the course our own lives will take. That is true, but the older we get I think most of us realize that more often than not, life seems to choose us. Our best laid ten-year plans are interrupted by life's own plans for us: by sudden illness, by the economy, by a pandemic or by natural disasters. We've all heard the phrase, life is what happens when you are busy making other plans. It's a phrase John Lennon popularized in his song Beautiful Boy. Let's face it: Terrible things happen and wonderful things happen, but seldom do we know ahead of time exactly what will happen to us. Like Mary, our choices often boil down to yes or no: yes, I will live this life that is being held out to me or no, I will not; yes, I will explore this unexpected turn of serendipitous events or no, I will not and continue to wallow in the disappointment life has handed me.

So often we don't realize that the opportunities that present themselves to us is that serendipitous push from God. Sometimes it is a way God is pushing us to be involved in life outside of ourselves. We can become so insular and in our own bubble that we don't see what is occurring right outside our own doors. We become selfish in wanting

everything our way, our needs met first that we fail to see what life is offering us. You can push God out of your life, as lots of folks do. Life is far safer, easier, cheaper, and more tranquil if you keep God at arms length and just say no when those unexpected moments occur. But are we really living when we turn away from those serendipitous moments.

The news announced to Mary surprised and frightened her. Mary, the angel says you will have a baby out of wedlock, people will whisper about you, Joseph will have doubts about you. And Mary said yes -- but she did so with a heavy sigh of trepidation-- how can this be. Just as we say during the rougher stretches of life: How could this have happened, this can't be happening to me and we can wallow in those thoughts or we can accept what has happened and move forward. This is what Mary did. God seemed determined to use her and she accepted not knowing whether this was a good thing or not.

She said yes. And so can we. We can stop doing whatever we are doing and listen to what God might be nudging us to do. We can decide to take part in a plan we did not choose, doing things we do not know how to do for reasons we do not entirely understand. We can take part in an unexpected turn of events that comes with no script and no guarantees. When we do that we are stepping up to do the work God asks us to do.

But deciding to say yes does not mean that we are unafraid. It just means that we are not willing to let our fear keep us locked in our rooms. So we say yes. We say, like Mary, Here I am; let it be with me according to your word, and by doing so we become one more who is willing to bear God into the world.

When someone decides to seek ordination in the Episcopal church you are asked over and over again why are you pursuing ordination. What has transpired in your life that makes you believe you have been called to the priesthood. For some people they have had a dramatic experience but when I went to seminary the reality was the most of us did not have a dramatic experience rather it was a series of nudges and pushes. My push came from my bishop. He was making his yearly visitation to the parish for confirmation and I was the confirmation teacher. Out of the blue he asked me when I was going to become a priest. I really don't remember what I said at the moment but I do recall quickly excusing myself and walking away from him. After the service, I went back and asked him why in the world would he ask me that. His reply was simply, I just feel that is something you're struggling with at the moment. I had been thinking about it but had absolutely not said a word to anyone at that point. This past Friday was the 36th anniversary of my ordination to the priesthood so I can thank Bishop Jack Spong for giving me that little serendipitous push.

And this, I think, is the point of the story about Mary which Meister Eckhart, a medieval mystic and theologian perfectly captured. He said: "We are all meant to be mothers of God. What good is it to me if this eternal birth of the divine Son takes place unceasingly but does not take place within me? And, what good is it to me if Mary is full of grace and I am not also full of grace? What good is it to me for the Creator to give birth to the Son if I do not also give birth to him in my time and my culture?" This then is the fullness of time: When the Son of God is begotten in us.

Perhaps it is time to reach back and learn from Mary what it means to be people who worship a serendipitous God. Perhaps it is time again to listen and watch for those

serendipitous moments. Perhaps it is time to listen to those angels – those serendipitous moments. Perhaps it is time to make room again for God. Perhaps then we will all sing like angels and let our serendipitous God be born in us today and again and again and again. Amen.