

"Out of the Blue"

II Samuel 7:8-16; Luke 1:26-38

Highlands Presbyterian Church, Columbus

December 18, 2016 – 4th Sunday in Advent – Rev. Ronald Botts

Some years back an American journalist wrote about a holiday he and his family had spent in Paris. Perhaps that might sound very exciting and festive to us, but that certainly was not this fellow's experience. Quite the contrary. Here is how he described it.

"Everything had gone wrong when we checked into our hotel on Christmas Eve; there was no Christmas spirit in our hearts. It was raining and cold when we went out to eat. We found a drab, little restaurant, shoddily decorated for the holiday. Only five tables were occupied. There were two German couples, two French families, and an American sailor by himself. In the corner a piano player listlessly played Christmas music.

"I was too tired and miserable to eat. I noticed that the other customers were eating in stony silence. The only person who seemed happy was the American sailor. While eating, he was writing a letter, and a half-smile lighted his face. At the table with the French family on our left, the father slapped one of the children for some minor infraction, and the boy began to cry. On our right the German wife began berating her husband.

"All of us were interrupted by an unpleasant blast of cold air. Through the front door came an old flower woman. She wore a dripping, battered overcoat, and shuffled in on wet, rundown shoes. She went from one table to another. 'Flowers, monsieur? Only one franc.' No one bought any. Wearily she sat down at a table between the sailor and us. To the waiter she said, 'A bowl of soup. I haven't sold a flower all afternoon.' Then she turned toward to the piano player. 'Can you imagine, soup on Christmas Eve?' He shrugged and pointed to an empty glass he kept for tips.

"The young sailor finished his meal and got up to leave. He walked over to the flower seller's table. 'Happy Christmas,' he said, and picked up two corsages. 'How much are they?' 'Two francs, monsieur.' Pressing one of the small corsages flat, he put it into the letter he had written, then handed the woman a twenty franc note.

"'I don't have change, monsieur,' she said. 'I'll have to get some from the waiter.' 'No, ma'am,' said the sailor, and he leaned over and kissed the old woman's cheek. 'This is my Christmas present to you.' Then he came over to our table and addressed me, 'May I have permission to present these flowers to your beautiful wife?' In one quick motion he gave Janet the corsage, wished us a Merry Christmas, then left out the door.

Suddenly the mood in the restaurant was totally changed and everyone began to celebrate Christmas. All because of one man. It was an unexpected gift."

All because of one man. Indeed, the world would be a far different place if it weren't for that occasional man or woman who somehow, someplace, enters the lives of others and makes a significant difference. It can be for good or ill, affecting millions or just a few.

Our New Testament reading for today lifts up just such a person. It is an announcement of the birth of one who will come to change the course of history. The world would never be the same again. He will touch the lives of those with whom he comes into direct contact, but his presence will extend beyond the barriers of time and place. His life will even come to impact ours, and does.

This word comes to a young Jewish woman and it tells of the important role she is soon to play. It is most unexpected. She is engaged to a man likely a bit older than she. According to the custom of those days, betrothal was an official relationship. It often involved cohabitation culminating then in the legal recognition of marriage. Family was the most important building block of social life, and was taken very seriously.

The startling announcement says that her child-to-be will inherit the throne of David, so it is important to note that her future husband was of that lineage. Long ago a special relationship was established between God and the man, David.

Samuel relates it this way: "Thus says the Lord of Hosts: I took you from the pasture, from following sheep to be prince over my people Israel; and I have been with you wherever you went... and I will make for you a great name. And I will appoint a place for my people. The Lord will make you a house. When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your ancestors, I will raise up your offspring after you and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be a father to him, and he shall be a son to me."

Perhaps Mary was familiar with these old words of scripture. They had been variously interpreted to refer to many leaders of the people over the years, but perhaps they were to be applied once again. Maybe this time, in the birth of a new child, they were to find their intended fulfillment. If so, the prophesy would come to be.

But why she? She of all women. Why was she the "favored one?" Yet here Mary accepts her destiny with the affirming words, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."

This young woman, this favored one, would soon be pregnant with a child, a precious new life within her, but one that already had been set aside with God's in-dwelling presence. This would be no ordinary child, nor she an ordinary mother. The course of history would be changed for all time.

Why should this be happening to Mary? Why does she have the designation of the Lord's favor upon her? It is an unexpected gift, one that comes without other indication. She would have thought herself to be the most unlikely of women. But it is God's choice and she receives it as such. The gift is given. The gift is accepted. The gift fulfills the prophecies of a savior who will give new life and direction to all of creation. This gift brings all of us together today.

Thanks be to God, for the best present of all this year is the one that gives meaning to Christmas Day and every other day. It is a time for us to receive and to show our gratitude by giving back in whatever ways love directs us.

Like the sailor in our opening story, one person can change a whole day for others—not necessarily by doing something spectacular—but by doing the right thing at the right time and for the right reason. So watch for opportunities unfolding out of the blue, consider what you can bring to the moment, and then seize the occasion to make a difference. That’s one of the ways you can pass along the gift that God has most graciously given to you and me.