

“Can You Name the New Director of Homeland Security?”

Luke 1:26-38

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I have been following the saga of Bernie Kerik all week, especially since I decided to open my sermon this week talking about him. Little did I know that the title of my sermon would have no answer the day before I was to preach.

In light of all the new cabinet appointments, I was going to play a little Trivia with you and see if you could name the new Director of Homeland Security. Then I was going to share his remarkable story. Let me go ahead and tell you some things about Bernie Kerik.

On December 3, President Bush nominated him to be the Director of Homeland Security to replace Tom Ridge. Based upon the way he handled his responsibilities as the New York Police Commissioner after the Attack on America, it appeared to everyone that the Senate would swiftly confirm him. On Friday evening of last week, that changed when Kerik called the President and withdrew his nomination.

I had been intrigued by Kerik's nomination because of the struggles he overcame to accomplish so much in his life. His mother, an alcoholic prostitute, was murdered when Bernie was a young boy. With very little guidance and encouragement, he dropped out of high school and got into trouble. To say the least, life was not easy for Mr. Kerik in those early years.

Forty years ago, if you had asked the residents of Paterson, New Jersey who would have been the young person in their community that would one day serve as New York's fortieth Police Commissioner and be asked by the President to lead one of the largest and most strategic government departments, how many would have selected Bernie Kerik? I doubt any would have. Surely he would have been the unlikeliest candidate to fill those shoes.

Out of all the people in the world two thousand years ago, who was the unlikeliest to be chosen to bear God's Son and bring salvation to the world? Probably a young peasant girl named Mary that lived in the obscure village of Nazareth. You cannot read Luke's version of the Christmas story and miss one of his major themes. **God uses ordinary people to change the course of history.** Humility and hope permeate the birth narratives.

“In the sixth month, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man name Joseph, a descendent of David. The virgin's name was Mary” Luke 1:26-27.

Christmas is filled with surprises and this is certainly one of them. Gabriel did not go to Judea but the farmland of Galilee; not Jerusalem but Nazareth; not to the temple but to a humble dwelling; not to a man or the wife of a prominent man but to an unmarried maiden. Just when we think we have God figured out, he does the unexpected. This is because He is not limited by the ordinary, usual, traditional or predictable. He's limited only by His imagination, hopes and dreams. I like this image of God and model for living. I appreciate the fact that God uses the ordinary to do extraordinary things.

“This appears to be the primary way that God changes the world,” writes Dr. William Willimon, Dean of the Chapel at Duke. “God changes the course of history not through earthquake, wind and fire but through ordinary people like Mary who get called. Furthermore, ordinary people who say yes.”

Listen to what Dr. Alan Culpepper says about Mary's call and the way God works, “Perhaps it would inject more realism into our Advent celebrations if we recognized that the glory of Christmas came about by the willingness of ordinary people to obey God's claim upon their lives.”

I am encouraged by the selection of Mary to bear God's Son. It opens a world of opportunities for you and me to make a difference in our nation, community, church, school, workplace and home.

However, God knows His call can intimidate us, raising fears and questions. It certainly did Mary.

"The angel went to her and said, 'Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you.' Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be" Luke 1:28-29.

Perhaps Mary knew the Tale of Tobit. This was a widely known story that told of a jealous angel that appeared on a bride's wedding night each time she married and killed her bridegroom. What maiden in that culture would not be afraid of a heavenly visitor after she was engaged?

I have no doubt God knew Mary would be afraid and prepared Gabriel ahead of time to be kind and reassuring. "But the angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. You will be with child and give birth to a son and you are to give him the name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever. His kingdom will never end.

'How will this be,' Mary asked the angel, 'since I am a virgin?' The angel answered, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age and she who was said to be barren is in her sixth month. For nothing is impossible with God' " Luke 1:30-37.

Fear gave way to confusion, didn't it? It usually does when we face a challenge. Actually, the two surround and terrify us as they did Mary.

Surely you can identify with Mary. You have faced a challenge so large that it filled your heart with fear and your mind with questions. What did you do?

Perhaps your challenge was imposed upon you by adverse circumstances. You lost your mate, job or health and were confronted with unfamiliar and frightening decisions. Your business was cut in half because of the Attack on America or downturn in the economy and you had to chart a new course.

Then again, the challenge that terrified you the most may have come from a God that looked upon you with favor as He did Mary and called you to be the catalyst for much needed change in the world. He has asked you to teach a Sunday School class, go on a mission trip, write a book, run for political office, work at the local Co-ops, tutor a struggling student, be a strong advocate for justice and spokesman for the oppressed or pursue a career in full-time Christian service.

How did you respond to His call upon your life? What did you do with the challenge He placed before you?

What did Mary do? "I am the Lord's servant," she said. "May it be to me as you have said" Luke 1:38.

What do you think enabled her to rise above her fears and questions and accept this enormous challenge? The final words of Gabriel had to make the difference. "For nothing is impossible with God."

Mary knew this challenge was beyond her ability but she had enough faith to believe that God could bring it about if it was His will. Her faith overruled her fears and according to Martin Luther, this was the greatest miracle that occurred that first Christmas. He called it the "Miracle of Belief."

I love what Frederick Buechner wrote about Mary's simple statement of submission and obedience. "She struck the angel Gabriel as hardly old enough to have a child at all, let alone this child. But, he had been entrusted with a message to give her and he gave it. He told her what the

child was to be named and who he was to be and something about the mystery that was to come upon her. 'You mustn't be afraid, Mary,' he said. And as he said it, he only hoped she wouldn't notice that beneath the great, golden wings he himself was trembling with fear to think that the whole future of creation hung now on the answer of a girl."

I wonder who is anxious today over your decision to accept God's call upon your life. Whose life hangs in the balance by what you will decide? What impact will it have upon others if your faith overrules your fears? Are you ready for your life to count for more than just your life? I hope so and pray you will say yes to God's call and challenge.