

THE FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT | DECEMBER 24, 2023

2 SAMUEL 7:1-11, 16 | LUKE 1:46B-55 | ROMANS 16:25-27 | LUKE 1:26-38

During this Advent season, I've used the homilies to put the week's readings in conversation with a lesser-known figure from church history. And since this is the last Sunday in Advent, I have one last person I want to introduce you to.

She's a woman named Thea Bowman. Thea was born as Bertha Bowman in 1937. She grew up in Jackson, Mississippi. Her parents were very active in the Methodist church. But when she was a child, she was intrigued by the nuns she saw around Jackson. And so she converts to Catholicism when she's nine. And when she's fifteen, she makes two startling choices. The first is that she enters a convent and becomes a nun. The second is that she enters a convent in La Crosse, Wisconsin.



And this is where her story starts to get really interesting. Because Bowman finds herself in a very different environment. She's a Black woman from the south living with a bunch of white Midwesterners. And she's in a church whose leadership doesn't really reflect the people in the pews on Sunday. And so she has to figure out what to do. One option she had was to try to fit in. To be just like everyone else in her religious community, blend in, and just go along. Another option would be to just wait and let the hierarchy evolve on its own.

But Bowman takes another track. She decides that instead of trying to be like everyone else or waiting for other people to do something, she's going to be who she is for the sake of the church. So she gets a masters in drama and doctorate in English. And she teaches workshops all over the country, about a hundred every year, teaching lay people, particularly lay women, about spirituality and multicultural ministry. She teaches children about how to identify and use their gifts. Her passion project is a hymnal of music from the African-American tradition. That hymnal is now published in its second edition. In short, she takes her experiences, her traditions, her culture, and she offers them as gifts to the church.

That's part of what's going on in today's gospel reading. This is the story of the annunciation, when Mary is called to be the Mother of God. And when St. Luke tells us this story, he's not trying to make a point about biology. He's trying to make a point about vocation. And you can see that in how Mary responds to Gabriel. Sometimes people sum up this story as when Mary said, "Yes" to God. That's true, that's great. But notice exactly what she says. Not just "Yes" or "Okay" but "Here I am."

This is interesting for a couple of reasons. One is that it's reminiscent of how Isaiah responds when God calls him to be a prophet. "Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" And I said, "Here am I; send me!" Second, this is the one I really want you to notice, Mary acknowledges that God calls her from *here*.

When we are called into God's service through our baptisms, we are sealed with the gift of the Holy Spirit. And that means that we have everything we need to participate in God's mission. We don't need some other qualification or expertise or knowledge. There

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isn't some pre-req that we need to get to start living our vocations. We begin our vocations *here*.

And we also don't need to lose anything before we need to participate in God's mission. This is what Bowman understood. That what she was called to leave behind in her baptism was all that draws us away from God. It was not who she was as a person, her background, her heritage, or her experience. Bowman could have tried to blend in. Or waited for someone else to do the work. But instead, she took on a posture of trust. The same one Mary took. "Here I am."

Bowman died of cancer in 1990. But a year before she died, she was invited to address the Conference of Bishops. This is how Bowman describes her own sense of vocation and calling.

"I come to my Church fully functioning. I bring myself; my black self, all that I am, all that I have, all that I hope to become. I bring my whole history, my traditions, my experience, my culture, my African-American song and dance and gesture and movement and teaching and preaching and healing and responsibility - as gifts to the Church."

To be "fully functioning" isn't really about doing some task. It's about being who God created you to be. Taking up space joyfully. And about bringing our entire selves—history, traditions, experience, culture, song, dance, gesture, movement—into God's service. What Bowman called "fully functioning," we might call "fully alive."

Bowman was thinking about this in terms of race and culture, but we can think about it a much more fundamental way, too. When we are grafted into God's service, it isn't some idealized future version of ourselves. *I can serve God and love my neighbor once I get all my problems figured out*. It isn't just a little part of us that God can use. *There's ten percent of my life that can serve God and love my neighbor*. And it isn't just envying the gifts of others. *Those are the people who can really make a difference*.

But it's recognizing that at every moment of our lives, we are a part of God's great love for creation. To use the image from today's gospel, the angel Gabriel is always at the door, inviting us to use our gifts, our stories, and our entire selves in the service of God's work.

And filled with the gift of the Holy Spirit, we too can join Mary and Bowman's song. God is here. Here I am.

Joseph Schattauer Paillé, Pastor