

Mary Says Yes
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15:39

Mary Says Yes
Luke 1: 26-38

I have never been visited by an angel. At least I don't think so. Perhaps I wasn't paying attention. Or perhaps the angel didn't look as I expected.

I know other people who have experienced an angel's presence, perhaps someone who saved them, or warned them, or helped bring them back from the edge of despair. Maybe you have had such an experience.

In today's text we look at Mary who is visited by an angel and asked an extraordinary question.

Now we are in the season of Advent which is all about waiting. Mary knew about waiting. She was engaged which is a prescribed waiting for the time of the marriage to arrive. Most likely she had been engaged for years and years as was often the custom at the time. Engagements often happened at birth or soon afterward. And most likely she was waiting to marry a man she may have never met, also quite common. Marriage was about family alliance, political gain, bringing harmony to discord or a handful of other reasons that had nothing to do with the concerns of the woman to be married.

And so Mary is waiting on marriage as she approaches womanhood and the age of maturity. Mary was likely 12 or 13 years old.

And suddenly an angel appears. Mary must have been terrified. I would be terrified.

One of the things I love about the Bible's description of these encounters is that so often when heavenly beings appear they say "fear not." It gives me the distinct impression that the mortals the angels come to speak to are petrified. The angels try to reassure them saying fear not.

I like thinking of a God whose first instructions to celestial beings in angel training school is, "please don't frighten them. Please reassure them." That's the loving God I keep inside my heart.

Mary is scared. I think this is important for us to see. Fear can debilitate us. Fear can keep us frozen in place, unable to move or change. Fear not says the angel. Fear not.

We understand this. At Pilgrim we are in an interim time, a time of waiting and preparing much like Advent. When your last pastor departed there was a lot of fear: fear of change, fear of the loss of members you care about, fear about money, fear of what would come next. Fear of how to move forward.

I am no angel but as your interim pastor part of my job is to say, "fear not." We will walk through this together. God has ideas and ministry and a future in store for you. But we have to work together to make it happen. We have to look at our past, we have to look around at who our neighbors are, we have to listen for God's voice in our midst. What are we to birth here in this place?

To move ahead, we have to let go of fear. And it helps if there is someone there saying, “fear not. God is with you.”

And so our biblical story tells us, “The angel Gabriel comes to a young virgin named Mary.” Keep in mind the word “virgin” in Palestinian culture meant a young, unmarried woman. Who would, by her society’s standards, be assumed to be a virgin in the sexual sense we mean. But for those of you struggling with “Virgin Mary”, there is a little wiggle room in there.

Gabriel comes and says "Hail favored one, the Lord is with you. You, Mary, will bear a child and he will be great, the Savior of the world."

“So, Mary, what do you think?”

Think about it. Would you?

Mary is a young engaged woman and is going to give birth to an illegitimate child before she gets married and cause shame and scandal to cover her family. She could be stoned to death. She would be considered damaged goods for the rest of her life. If she is cast out of her family she would be forced into begging or prostitution to survive.

Is it any wonder she needs a moment to think about it?

I imagine all of heaven and God holding their breaths. A waiting, an eternal moment while this young woman mulls it over in her mind. Her whole life sitting there in her decision, in this room, reflected in the light of the angel.

Mary what are you going to say? What is it going to be? Yes, no, maybe, I’ll think it over, I’ll get back to you, maybe next time....

Remember, God gives us free will. God could not compel Mary to say yes. God could scare her, but God doesn’t. The angel says fear not. God could have sent an earthquake, a flood, parted the local river, given Mary the ability to turn her sewing needle into a snake. These things had all worked before.

But no.

I get the sense that this decision was one that should not be coerced. Instead Gabriel is saying “Mary, I am calling you. God needs you. Will you do this? God loves you and you have pleased God very much. You, favored one. God wants to entrust to you the most precious thing ever given. A child . A special child. A child sent from God. A child who is God. A child that God entrusts you to raise and love and hold and teach and eventually release to the world as parents do. Will you do this Mary? Will you?”

All creation bending toward her, bending toward this woman in this moment. Holding its breath. What will she say?

I think we can relate to this holding our breaths waiting to see what happens next. Pilgrim church is in a time of transition. We are working together in this interim time to learn more about ourselves as a congregation and to find a pastor who meets the needs and hopes of this particular congregation. And we wait as the story and our understanding of it unfolds and you move forward to calling a settled pastor. We wonder what will happen next? What will it be like? Who will say yes to us, Pilgrim Church?

Mary is confused or “perplexed by the angel’s words and wondered what sort of greeting might be.”

But then Mary starts to open her heart cautiously and begins to ask the logical questions. "How is this going to happen to me? I have no husband."

She thinks to herself, Ok, if this is to pass, what are the details? What do I need to know? What is God telling me? What does this mean?

From fear to questions, a cautious opening up. We, too, as a church as we come to work on our profile, as we seek to learn how God is speaking to us in this time, we will ask questions of ourselves and each other. How will calling a new pastor come to be in this place?

And then to action. For Mary she pondered these things in her heart. She listened to the angel and then, and then, there was this long, long, loooooong moment when the angel was done speaking when we wait. God waits. The angel waits. This moment where all creation, all was dependent on the answer of one young teenager.

Think about the wonderful teenagers we have here in this church, or maybe the ones you have at home. Imagine God coming to one of them, coming and saying will you, dear favored one, will you bear the Christ child, will you raise the Christ child as your own. Will you? And then creation holds its breath waiting for the answer. Will you? All creation waiting on the answer of your teenage daughter or son?

Advent is about waiting. Did you ever wonder how long God waited for the right person to bear Jesus? How long God waited to find Mary.

Or maybe, how many young women (or maybe older ones as well) that God asked before Mary?

Waiting. How long was God's advent? How long the waiting for the fulfillment of all that was promised, peace, good things to the poor, equality, justice. How long God has been waiting for that? So in your waiting remember God is waiting too. As we wait for the birth of this child, and the birth of Pilgrim's next new chapter, so God waited.

Gabriel waits and Mary finally says, "Here am I the servant of the Lord, let it be with me according to your word."

Mary says yes. Mary says yes! You can imagine the angel yelling to all the celestial creation. Mary says yes! And I imagine God smiling. A quiet knowing thankful smile. Perhaps with a hint of sadness for this child for all the promise will also bring sadness.

Mary says yes. Like a divine RSVP. Mary says yes.

Mary is quite an amazing figure. She is called the first disciple by some. She was Jesus' follower, she believed in him, even before his birth; she believed in what was to come.

Some traditions call her a co-redemptrix, meaning that it was through her that redemption for humankind, salvation, also came into being. She believed, She listened to God, She agreed to bear a special child. Together she and Jesus changed the world.

With Mary's yes, she agreed to a life changing decision and through that everything was changed. She moved past her fear, her doubts, her wondering about the details, to a yes.

A child is coming, being born in our midst, Emmanuel-God with us. What will you say to this child, will Jesus be born in your heart this Christmas. And if so, what shall that mean to you and to those you are asked to serve?

As we hear Mary say yes, we too are challenged in what we shall say to God. God comes to us and says, I have a job for you too. This world is still full of suffering and inequality and despair. Will you, o favored one, join in bringing about the peace of Christ, the kingdom of God? Will you, in whom I am well pleased, share of your wealth and your power and your prestige and your blessings with those who are less fortunate? Will you?

Can we do the same as Mary? God comes to us as we wait and asks us to do participate in the life changing ministry of Jesus. Asks us to feed and house the needy, to challenge oppression, to have uncomfortable conversations about race and immigration and taxes with those who think differently than we do.

And as we wait as a congregation in transition, who might we call who will say yes with us to the work of bringing about the kingdom here and now?

Mary said yes. And she did not know where this would take her in the end. Which was in the end a mixture of blessing and grief. If we say yes, we too do not know where it will take us.

Will you say yes?

Cheryl Kristolaitis has a poem called "for those who say no to angels"

I felt the brush of angel's wings across my face.
Looked up, startled
And felt my life fall away
Like so many pieces of shattered glass.
"Don't be afraid," a voice said,
As if this was something I could assimilate
And go on with my day.
Don't be afraid
Even though the cosmos has shifted
And heaven has walked into the room.
"I have something I want you to do."
At least I thought that's what I heard.
But to tell the truth I was still staring
At that blend of light and motion
That seemed to mesmerize me in my place.
I don't know how I responded
Except I am sure that I didn't say yes.
Maybe.
Give me some time.
Let me think this through.
Half certain that when the light had left the room
I could convince myself that it was only
The way the sun filtered itself through the clouds that day.
But I couldn't.
I felt the brush of angel's wings
And wanted that moment back.
I want to know what would have happened
If I had said yes.

God may come to us with angel's wings and proclamation. Or in quiet stillness and light. Or in an unexpected pastoral candidate or in a particularly honest conversation about Pilgrim's life and ministry.

God's call to us may come with claims of power and promises of blessing, (all people shall call you blessed). But in the end, when we are called, the Holy one trembles and waits for an answer.

Imagine that. Imagine that God is waiting for you, too. Will you say yes? Amen.