

4 Advent B December 20, 2020  
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**Embracing the Possible**  
Church of the Good Shepherd, Athens, OH

One of the things I miss right now is the brief conversations with all of you after the church service is over. Those quick comments people make, or questions people ask just before they leave the church building and reemerge into the world. Those are moments I learn a lot about people, and sometimes hear opinions about the music, readings, or the sermon. I enjoy hearing what a person takes away from a church service, what part was special for them that day.

Every now and then, a parishioner will share something completely unexpected and hard to forget. That happened to me nearly fourteen years ago, on the Fourth Sunday of Advent, in my first parish. It was a different Lectionary that year, and I had preached on Matthew's Gospel about Joseph, Mary's betrothed instead of the part of Luke's Gospel designated for today. After the service, at the door, a parishioner shook my hand and said with great enthusiasm, "Thank you for preaching on Joseph. It was good to hear about a man. Lately it seems the Bible is only about women."

His comment was a surprise, and something I'm sure plenty of scholars and theologians, especially feminist and liberation theologians would strongly argue. I thought it odd, especially since two out of the four Gospel readings in Advent feature a man: John the Baptist. This memory often surfaces on this Sunday, the Fourth and final Sunday in Advent, and always when the Lectionary comes to Luke's Gospel and we read once again Mary's extraordinary visit from an angel.

This visit is called "The Annunciation" because the angel announces to Mary her belovedness, by calling her "highly favored" and "filled with grace" and God is inviting her to participate in a new creation. It's a powerful event, one that has inspired artists and poets for centuries. I believe it is unfortunate this powerful story has been misinterpreted to mean a 'good woman' is supposed to be submissive and obedient because that certainly isn't what is happening in this beautiful scripture passage.

What can be easily overlooked is the particular and ancient pattern the author of Luke's Gospel uses in this account of a person being called by God. This pattern is found throughout the Hebrew Bible, and is always how the stories of the greatest prophets in the Bible begin. First, a messenger of God appears to a person and

announces God wants them to participate in moving God's plan of salvation forward. Next, the person questions this announcement, often by pointing out they are not able or equipped for the job. Remember Moses questioned God's call by saying he had problems speaking when God asked him to lead the People of Israel out of slavery in Egypt. Jeremiah said he was too young. Next, the messenger or God responds to whatever the objection is by stating God will be part of whatever God asked the person to do. No one is expected to go it alone when it comes to answering God's call; God will not only be with them, and God will take care of any deficit and promises to watch over the person. Finally, the person accepts the call, most often with words like, "Here I am, the servant of The Lord."

We can clearly see Mary's encounter with the angel Gabriel follows the same pattern, making this encounter a call story like those of other prophets in the Bible. Gabriel tells Mary what God wants her to do, she asks how she's supposed to have a baby when she is not yet sexually active with her betrothed husband, the angel responds God who created heaven and earth, who speaks life into being, will mysteriously take care of that detail. This is also misinterpreted to mean God acted like some pagan god that impregnated a girl like some of the Greek and Roman myths. But that is not what God is up to. God isn't trying to replace a reproductive partner because God is not looking to reproduce. Instead, God is going to redeem the world and destroy the power of sin and death. Such salvation is not going to be accomplished by reproductive biology, but only through a new kind of creation, one God is part of. This makes Jesus' birth a Mystery in the holiest sense of the word. God's own self is going to participate in the miracle of birth. That is why the angel tells Mary the Holy Spirit will be with her and the power of the 'most high' will overshadow her. These are phrases that imply God's presence and protection because Mary is being invited to be part of something brand new, and it can be scary going into the unknown where people will struggle to understand and accept what you are doing. Finally, Mary says yes to her calling and in so doing becomes the first person to embody the Good News that God is up to something new.

It's worth noting Mary is the first person in the Gospels the Holy Spirit will be with, even before Jesus' baptism and that exciting Pentecost when the Holy Spirit descended like tongues of fire on the disciples and Mary in the upper room after Jesus' resurrection and ascension. That might be why a little later in Luke's Gospel Mary was inspired to sing a song we call The *Magnificat* proclaiming God's salvation has already been accomplished. Because it started in her yes to God's possibility, her willingness to enter into the mystery of the new creation. The mystery we also call the Incarnation.

That is where we are on this final Sunday in Advent, the season of preparing for Christmas and for Jesus to return and complete the redemption that began when a young girl said yes to God's call. Mary's yes reminds us every time someone responds to God's call to participate in God's salvation, God's Kingdom comes a little closer. Whatever that call may be, whether it's ordained ministry, volunteering to help stop food insecurity, to serve in leadership, to teach, to listen, or to support leadership, to adapt or change an existing ministry, or start something new, whatever the call every yes brings God's Kingdom near. Mary's call story reminds us what a calling from God really is: the invitation to participate in God's redemption with God. It's being part of God's new creation, where Jesus is our King, not the empire of power and death and fear.

It's a powerful message, and maybe a little bit dangerous to imagine a young girl being open to God's possibility, whose obedience is not submissive but incredibly courageous. Mary's yes to God is a statement against the empire that treated people as commodities instead of beloved human beings. Mary's yes to God is the courageous act to embody the dream God has for this world instead of succumbing to the oppression of violence, racism, sexism, and inequality. Mary's yes to God is the beginning of overturning those inequalities to create a better world, one where hunger and poverty and racism and sexism and ageism and all those other "isms" are no longer reality. A world where we all live as beloved children of God and neighbors to each other instead of consumers shopping around for the next best deal. Mary's yes to God is the startling reminder such a world is possible, when we let God be God and surrender to God's will, allowing God to work in us and through us.

No wonder one of my former parishioners was uncomfortable with the message of Biblical women like Mary. Her call story is a powerful one, and perhaps a threatening one to anyone who benefits from the status quo. Perhaps that is why her story is often misinterpreted and used to put women in a place of submission or why people get hung up on the lack of reproductive biology in Mary's call story, because those things are easier to handle than the powerful truth that the way things are in the world aren't how they have to be. God's way of love could still be our way.

Therefore, this is why we hear Mary's call story this week. Not to prepare us for Christmas in a few days, but to remind us our longing for Jesus to return can include listening for a call to participate with God in the new creation called incarnation.

Today we are reminded the mystery of the incarnation isn't just what we celebrate every year, it is work any of us might be called to, to embody Christ in the world.

That is no easy task in a world that has become about social distancing, on-line meetings and on-line church services, fewer gatherings, and public events. There is grief behind every creative attempt to worship on-line, meet on-line, learn and teach on-line, celebrate on-line, and even receive medical treatment on-line. There is grief and fear in bills that cannot be paid, deteriorated household incomes, and jobs that cannot be found. Of course, there is the deep grief of families who have lost loved ones to the pandemic, or who were not able to be with a dying loved one. You can almost feel the weariness of all this grief, even as hope glimmers in the recent release of the vaccine.

Perhaps this weariness is why we need the reminder of the power of Mary's yes to God more than ever. The reminder that what has been cast down is being raised up by God. The reminder that God's overshadowing love is with us, even in our grief. Perhaps this year the embodiment of Christ in the world looks like what we are willing to abstain from to in order protect the health of each other. Perhaps this year the embodiment of Christ in the world looks like being courageous enough to open to God's presence without the comfort of our usual traditions so that we can see and recognize God is present in our sorrow as well as in joy.

On this Fourth and final Sunday in Advent, whether or not you feel the weariness of the world, I hope Mary's call story helps open your eyes and heart to be part of all that is possible with God.