

Sermon “Yes”
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SCRIPTURE Isaiah 11:1-10

A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. The spirit of the LORD shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD. His delight shall be in the fear of the LORD. He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear; but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked. Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist, and faithfulness the belt around his loins. The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder’s den. They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea.

On that day the root of Jesse shall stand as a signal to the peoples; the nations shall inquire of him, and his dwelling shall be glorious.

Luke 1:26-38 In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin’s name was Mary. And he came to her and said, “Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.” But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.” Mary said to the angel, “How can this be, since I am a virgin?” The angel said to her, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative

Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God.” Then Mary said, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” Then the angel departed from her.

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Perplexed? The angel Gabriel visits Mary. He calls her God’s “favored one,” and tells her, “The Lord is with you.” And Mary is perplexed. Perplexed. It’s not every day that one is visited by an angel; that an angel appears to a teenaged girl and tells her that she is favored by God. I don’t know that the word perplexed would do this situation justice. Mary would have to be one strong and confident teenager to be simply perplexed.

But in her book, Light of the World, A Beginner’s Guide to Advent, author, professor and biblical scholar, Amy Jill Levine explains that “the Greek for ‘perplexed’ is *diatiarasso*, which connotes not just confusion, but terror. As we’ve seen, this is the same root that describes Herod’s fear upon hearing of a rival king (Matthew 2:3), and Zechariah’s fear upon seeing the angel in the Temple (Luke 1:12). Something momentous and life changing is about to occur to a Jewish woman on the outskirts of the empire.”¹

But apparently Gabriel gets it, understands that Mary is frightened. For he then tells Mary “Do not be afraid.” Now I’m not sure whether Gabriel tells Mary not to be afraid because he sees her reaction to his visit or because of what he is about to say to Mary. Gabriel tells Mary she will

Conceive a son, and name him Jesus.

That her son will be great, the Son of the Most High and will receive from God the throne the great Jewish leader, David.

That her son will reign over Israel and his kingdom will never end.

That’s a lot to absorb.

I would have had lots of questions for Gabriel. More immediate questions like “What am I going to tell Joseph? Will he believe it when I tell him about the angel

¹ Levine, Amy Jill. LIGHT OF THE WORLD, A Beginner’s Guide to Advent. United Methodist Publishing: Nashville, TN, 2019. p. 67

and my being pregnant with David's heir? And what about my family? What about the neighbors? What will they think? How will I show my face? Why me?

Mary had only one question. How could it be? Mary wondered how this could happen because she is still a virgin – or in other translations – has not known man. So Gabriel explains that the Holy Spirit will come upon her and the power of the Most High will overshadow her so that her child will be the son of God. He makes it sound so simple. And then he explains that Elizabeth, her old relative, is pregnant - so nothing is impossible for God.

These words must have comforted Mary because she replies, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Her words don't reflect the questions that I would have through my head. Mary, a seemingly ordinary, young peasant woman, gives a reply that sounds so calm and accepting of this unbelievable news from an angel. I think it's astonishing, especially when we look back on Jewish history.

When God tells Jeremiah that God has chosen him to be a prophet, Jeremiah is a little reluctant, "Ah, Lord, God! Truly I do not know how to speak. For I am only a boy!" God tells him not to say he's only a boy, that he will go wherever God sends him. I guess God told him.

When God calls Moses to go to Pharaoh and free the Israelites, Moses asks: Who am I to do this? Who I am supposed to tell them you are? What if they don't believe me? GOD, I am not an eloquent speaker, I am slow of speech and slow of tongue. God, please send someone else. God gets mad but suggests that Moses can tell his brother, Aaron, what God says. Then Aaron will tell the people.

And we all know the story of Jonah, he ran away and stowed away on a boat when God wanted him to go to the Ninevah. Then he was thrown overboard and ended up inside a fish.

Mary says "yes" to God. She doesn't say anything about being too young - that she's a mere teenager and not ready for this kind of responsibility. She doesn't ask what she's supposed to say to people, who might not be accepting of her as an unwed mother. She doesn't make plans to run away. She accepts her call from God. Her words sound very calm, like she is not afraid. Mary appears to be at peace.

Was Mary at peace because the angel told her not to be afraid? Was she at peace because the angel told her that her elderly cousin, who was thought to be barren, was now pregnant? What words offered Mary reassurance?

Can you recall a time when someone's words gave you reassurance, enabled you to move on, offered you peace in the midst of a challenge?

As most of you know, I was a hospice nurse before becoming a minister. I had done it for decades, so I was confident in what I was doing. Well, that confidence hit rock bottom when I was a seminary student. I had done well at Hartford Seminary, where I did the first half of my seminary education and most of our assignments were take home papers. And the other students looked a lot like me. Second career persons. Older.

But when I went to Yale Divinity School. It was different. The students were a lot younger than I was, younger than my daughters. One of my professors was about to become a father. I already had 3 grandchildren. What was I doing there? I wondered. And we had exams.

We were given blue notebooks to write in with a set questions to answer in what was too short a period of time to put my answers on paper. At my first exam, I looked at the questions and my mind went totally blank for what seemed like forever. I don't recall what grade I received, but I did pass.

Later on came a meeting with the Dean of Students and my Seminary Advisor, who I had met once. My UCC mentor and the supervising minister from the church where I was a ministerial intern were also there. The divinity school representatives asked me lots of questions and did not seem to like my answers. While I left with suggestions from them, I went to the commuter lounge and I cried before heading to my internship church.

There I met with my supervising minister, for our regular weekly meeting. We spoke about that meeting at the divinity school. He agreed that it had been difficult. But he also told me that he believed that I had what it takes to be a minister. Those words of reassurance could not have come at a better time. In the midst of my doubt, his reassurance helped me to continue my path to ordination. His words gave me peace.

We never know when what we say can provide reassurance or encouragement to another. We never know when our words might bring peace to someone.

We never know what God will call us to do. But, we, like Mary are favored by God. We are God's beloved. Whatever God calls us to do, in the midst of that call, we can be sure that God is also telling us, "Do not be afraid."

I don't think that Mary could ever have dreamed that God could choose her to give birth to the Messiah – the heir to the throne of David, the son of God. I imagine she still had lots of questions but Mary also had faith. And in the midst of that faith was God's dream of peace that we hear in Isaiah.

God's dream for his people is a world of justice, equity, righteousness and faithfulness. Where the "wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den. They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain".

We have yet to know that world - where creatures live together in peace. It has yet to be, but we all have a part in making it a reality as we await the birth of Mary's son; as we do our best to bring peace to our parts of the world, as we try to follow in the way of Jesus.

We know that Mary said yes to God. We know the rest of Mary's story. It's the story of the mother of Jesus, and it was not always easy. It involved her joy that we hear in the Christmas story and also the pain of watching her son be crucified and life in between. But her story was part of God's story, of Jesus' story and God's love for the world and God's desire for a world of peace and justice for all people and creatures.

God has a plan for all of us. Meister Eckhart once said, "We are all meant to be mothers of God...for God is always needing to be born."

This Advent, let us consider how we are called to say “yes” to God. We may have lots of questions. And there will be challenges and difficult times. But God is already with us, inviting us to give birth to Jesus - to bring His love and peace to our world.