

“Birthing a Promise”

Luke 1: 26-38

Advent VI

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December 24, 2017

From the Pulpit

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Prayer for Illumination: Almighty God, as you draw yet nearer to us in this Advent Season, may we turn ourselves toward you. Cast your light upon the words of scripture we've heard so that their truth might shine across the years. May they reawaken hope even when everything seems hopeless. May they sharpen our faith even when we think it's lost its edge. And now may the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer. Amen.

In the middle of my week, I got an interesting call on my cell phone that interrupted my day. Just as quickly as I answered and said hello, I hear this loud horn from a cruise ship company and the voice making the proclamation, "You have won a free cruise." And the horn blows again.

As excited as I am to win things, I am skeptical and wonder what sales presentation Jeff and I had to sit through before we receive said cruise. There isn't much room for questions. But I have questions. When would this be? Could I bring our daughter? Is it an upper deck cabin with a view (I hear verandas are nice), or is it a smaller interior room, somewhere below the waterline?

I have questions. Is your company free from mechanical failures? How do you protect against the Norovirus? The salesperson didn't seem to leave room for me to even ask these questions, but it must have been my hesitation that stunned her. She responds, "you don't want to take a free cruise?" My answer, "I guess not!" She quickly hangs up on me.

Ever have those interruptions in your day that leave you with more questions than answers?

What about this interruption to Mary's day. What about that day when she is hanging out and this angel just shows up? This angel who we know as Gabriel, shows up saying, "Greetings favored one! The Lord is with you. You are going to conceive in your womb and bear a son and name him Jesus!"

Mary is perplexed by these words. Much perplexed. Talk about an interruption that changes the course of your life.

Gabriel goes on to tell her that this would be the son of the Most High and he would be on the throne of his ancestor David. Gabriel does not ask how that sounded to her and whether she would like to try out for the role; he tells her. God has been gracious to you. You are to bear a son and that he will be the king of Israel, forever.

Even though Gabriel says she had found favor with God and she shouldn't fear, she really only responds with a question, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?"

I bet that is only one of Mary's questions. I bet she has a lot of questions.

Author Barbara Brown Taylor thinks Mary could have asked these follow-up questions. *Will Joseph stick around? Will my parents love me? Will my friends stand by me or will I get dragged into town and stoned for sleeping around? Will the pregnancy go alright? Will labor be hard? Will there be anybody there to help me? You say he'll be the king of Israel, but what about me? What about me?..* if any of those questions came to her, she didn't ask them.[1]

Didn't Mary have these questions? She is human after all. Didn't Mary want all the answers before saying YES, before committing the rest of her life to what seemed from the start to be a very BIG deal?

According to Luke, she listens to all Gabriel had to say, and then it's her turn. Would Mary say Yes or No. Mary may have been the only one in history of the world who had that particular decision to make. Mary isn't used to this. She isn't a professional at this, any of this.

I guess Mary could have said no. If 'no' is the way she chooses then she simply will look away from Gabriel until he leaves the room. Tell him "no thanks." Then she's alone again or she can go back to what is the most familiar and pretend nothing ever happened.

But Mary chooses differently. Mary says yes. She says "Yes" to God before she wraps up all the answers with a bow. She says YES and brings God into the world.

In the Eastern Orthodox church, Mary is known as *theotokos*, "The God-bearer." I love this word. *Theotokos*-The one who bears God into the world.

I think Mary found joy in her heart when she gets over being perplexed. Mary didn't have all the answers, but she is willing to live into a bold new world. She sings a song of the transformation of the world as she bears God for us. She takes a risk in listening and following God. She takes on the privilege of responding YES to God.

But it's not going to be easy. It's going to get rough for Mary, as the mother of Jesus. She is going to see her son ridiculed, interrogated, beaten, and she will see him die at the hands of the authorities. There is power in her "Yes", despite all that was to come.

There is some risk involved in that YES-taking. Saying yes doesn't mean that you aren't afraid. It just means that you are not willing to let your fear stop you. That you are not willing to let your fear keep you locked in your room. So you say YES, to an angel, and you say, "Here I am, let it be according to your word." I wonder what the world would be like if more people respond to God's interruption in their lives like Mary does.

When you hear Mary's story and her choices and her decisions, it is hard not to hear a little of our own. On our best (day) or with our best laid plans we get interrupted: A new diagnosis that turns our world upside down. A surprise baby. Aging parents. A mental health crisis. The pink slip on a Friday afternoon. That call in the middle of the night. Like Mary, our choices, often boil down to YES or NO.

Yes, I will live this life that is being held out for me. Or, *No, I will not.*

Yes, I will explore this unexpected turn of event and all that it can be. Or, *No I will not.*

We've all said no to things. We've all said no to the ways God moves in our lives. We are still loved. We aren't punished for our no. In fact, we are forgiven for our no! This is surprising and unexpected. When we say no-- God is not dissuaded. In

fact, God continues to pursue us. God keeps working in us and through us to bring about God's acts of justice and mercy in the world. God keeps coming to us so that we may know of God's love-- for us.

On this Fourth Sunday of Advent, Mary reminds us of what it looks like and what it sounds like when God shows up in your life -- unannounced, unexpected, and unplanned.

At some point when you say YES-to God, you become a God-bearer in the world, too. You become one of Mary's people, part of her posse. You are one more Theotokos who is willing to bear God into the world. What if we live our lives in the breathtaking experience of saying YES to God. Yes! -- to the struggle of living a life faithful to the one who changes the world.

Sometimes, it's in admitting we don't have all the answers, that suddenly we can hear a whisper from another place. Sometimes, in admitting that we don't get it, we open ourselves up to receive something from God. Sometimes when we stop talking and stop ourselves from giving answers to our own questions, we allow ourselves to be filled with something new.

Mary responds to the most amazingly terrifying thing that could happen to her and she says, "Here I Am." She says yes

to birthing a promise to the nations. The promise of new life, new birth, a new power structure, a new way of being. Mary moves from peasant girl to prophet as she voices what it means to be the first God bearer in the world.

The promise in the birth of Jesus on Christmas is that we bear witness to the presence of God come among us. Today, we bear God into the world as we witness to God's promises to little Wells in her baptism. It is in the promise her parents make and the promises that we make, wherever she goes, that we will help bear witness to God's love for her. Today in her baptism, we witness that she, too, is a God-bearer-- like Mary--like all of us.

In a few short hours, we return to this sacred space to hear the promises anew. Tonight, we sing as the angels do when they declare glory to the newborn king. Even in the stillness of this night, we know of the shouts of joy to the world as God comes near to dwell among us. God comes to us through a peasant girl, into a manger, as a vulnerable, helpless, dependent young baby, who is the savior of the world. The promise of Christmas is that this new life changes everyone around him. He changes everything.

This year you don't have to wait too long to hear that promise once again. Come again. Listen for the angel Gabriel, calling on Mary, calling on us to be God-bearers for the rest of the world.

Amen.

[1] Barbara Brown Taylor, "Mothers of God" in *Gospel Medicine*, 1995, 164ff.

[2] Karoline Lewis, www.workingpreacher.org

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