

Advent 2022 Week 1

Mary's Yes!

Today marks the beginning of Advent. As we point out every year, Advent is the four Sundays prior to Christmas meant to help us quiet our spirit and examine our hearts as we anticipate the birth of the Lord, his coming to us. While American culture focuses on Santa Claus and giving gifts, in the church we focus on something much greater, the Incarnation, the miracle of Christmas, that God became flesh and dwelt among us. It is beyond comprehension really. One of the Orthodox hymns in part states **“Prepare, O Bethlehem! Throw open your gates...For the One Who Is becomes what He was not, and the fashioner of all creation is being fashioned, granting the world His great mercy.”** The fashioner of all creation is being fashioned. That’s the mystery of the Incarnation. Anglican mystic and author, Maggie Ross wrote, **“Behold. Behold the God who is infinitely more humble than those who pray to him, more stripped, more emptied, more self-outpouring...The scandal of the Incarnation is not that we are naked before Emmanuel, God with us, but that God is named before us and, in utter silence, given over into our hands and hearts.” ...Maggie Ross**

The mystery of the Incarnation, God with us, come down to us. The miracle of Christmas is such that I often struggle with what to preach because there is so much and I want to cover it all. As I prayed and studied, I kept hearing one word in my spirit. Yes! I kept thinking about the yes of Mary and the yes of Joseph. I couldn’t get away from that so I finally said “yes” myself and this morning we are going to look at Mary, the mother of Jesus and her obedient and surrendered heart. It’s been six years since I preached about Mary I think so if you have an excellent memory, you can consider this a refresher course on the Mother of our Lord.

Turn to Luke 1:26. I want us to see a couple of things about Mary that have implications and application for us. **“In the sixth month, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin’s name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, ‘Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you.’ Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said to her, ‘Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most**

High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end.'

'How will this be,' Mary asked the angel, 'since I am a virgin?' The angel answered, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be barren is in her sixth month. For nothing is impossible with God.'

'I am the Lord's servant,' Mary answered. 'May it be to me as you have said.' Then the angel left her." Luke 1:26-38

We don't have a lot of biographical detail about Mary. The Scripture refers to her as a virgin, a young woman that has not married or had sexual relations. Some believe Mary to have been a young teen ager, somewhere around 16 -17. There is plenty about which to speculate since the focus of Scripture is on her Son rather than on his mother. An apocryphal work called the *Protoevangelium of James* says her mother Anne and father Joachim were unable to have children and were advanced in years so they promised the Lord if they had a child they would give her to the Lord. When Mary was 3, they took her to the temple in Jerusalem and presented her to the priests and she served the Lord there. It was from this same apocryphal book we get the idea Joseph was an older widower with children of his own.

I don't know if any of that is true or accurate, but I do know Mary must have been an extraordinary young lady. As we understand it, God was choosing a mother for his Son so he would have chosen well, wouldn't he? The bible says Mary was highly favored, that the Lord was with her, that she found favor with God, that she was blessed above all other women. The more you read and reflect on Mary, the more amazed and inspired you become by her life, her courage, her commitment to God. Like no other woman in history, Mary was favored by God to bear God in flesh in her womb. What an extraordinary thought.

Tradition says Mary, now betrothed to Joseph, was drawing water at a well in Nazareth, the site now marked by the Church of the Annunciation, when the angel Gabriel appeared to her with this curious greeting, "Greetings you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you." The angel then lays out God's strange, unheard of, impossible sounding plan for Mary. "You will be with child and give birth to a son and you are to call his name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High." I can imagine Mary saying, "What now?" "What are you

saying?” I imagine things went into slow motion for a moment in her mind. “How can this be?” “I’m a virgin.” With this word from Gabriel her whole world is rocked to the core! Pregnant but single. Pregnant, but not by the man to whom she was engaged. Pregnant and unmarried, she would face judgment from the priests and synagogue leaders, scorn from the community, disappointment from her parents and family. “How could you do this to us?” And what about Joseph? How could she expect Joseph to believe such an unbelievable story? Matthew’s gospel explains how Joseph reacted to the news but I can’t get over what must have been running through Mary’s mind. How overwhelming this must have been. “The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God.” Incredible!

The angel said she was to name her son Jesus which means Savior because he will save his people from their sins. And the angel said “the Lord God will give him the throne of his father David and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end.” This sounds like he will be the Messiah and King. That sounds amazing, but it also sounds like trouble. It was a dangerous time for Jewish nationalists. Mary knew not too many miles from her home in Nazareth the Romans had put down a Jewish insurrection and crucified 2,000 Jews and burned the city of Sepphoris to the ground. In fact, Joseph as a carpenter and stone mason might have been hired to help rebuild Sepphoris because it was close to Nazareth.

In spite of the questions, the lack of details, the possibility of trouble, all the unknown, Mary said Yes! “May it be to me as you have said.” The bible says, “Then the angel left her.” Alone. “Now what? Who can I tell? Who can I trust? What’ll I do? When will this happen? If it was me I would have been saying, “Hey Gabriel, can you come back? Listen, we need to talk. This is going to disrupt my whole life. I’ve got my marriage planned, my life planned and now this. Who’s paying for this? What about labor pain? Is this going to hurt? Is there a pain exemption for me? Good question. Pain, disruption, inconvenience. Everything would change.

I have to tell you, **At the place where God’s kingdom and God’s plans break in on our plans, there is going to be pain.** God was calling Mary to a place of surrender and commitment, to a place of sacrifice and obedience and there would be pain involved. Mary would experience pain as her body made room for this baby growing in her womb. She would know the disruption of her plans by an inconvenient pregnancy, the pain of childbirth. Nothing would be the same and it’s the same for us. When we say yes to Jesus, when we surrender our

plans to his greater plan, there will be pain, you may feel loss, there will be inconvenience, God's timing is seldom convenient to our timing. You'll experience change as the seed God plants in your heart begins to grow, as God given dreams develop, as a God ordained plan is birthed in your life. Saying yes is seldom without disruption and sacrifice. It's seldom pain free. Mary was blessed and highly favored, but that didn't exempt her from pain, sacrifice and sorrow.

Another thing we learn from Mary's experience: **Information seems to come on a "need to know" basis and we won't have all the answers up front.** She didn't know how all of this would turn out or what it would mean. It was a walk of faith for Mary. She would ponder in her heart so many things, so many mysteries concerning her son, the incarnate God. There was much she didn't know, couldn't know, much she didn't need to know, yet. She couldn't have foreseen the cross and all the pain in her heart, or the glorious resurrection. God didn't give her information or answers up front and he seldom gives them to us either. Instead, like Mary, we walk by faith and not by sight, overshadowed by the Holy Spirit's presence, trusting in the God who is faithful and who does the impossible! Trust him with your Yes, even when you don't have details, when you don't know the next step. Just keep trusting Jesus.

Mary could have said, "Listen Gabriel, tell God I really appreciate the offer but I'm afraid it's going to have to be a no. It's not a good time for me right now. Pregnancy doesn't fit in my plans. I just can't, besides, Joseph will be mad, my folks will be upset and embarrassed. It will simply cost me too much. You'll find someone else."

Have you ever responded that way, giving God your excuses? "Here are the reasons I can't" but it still comes down to surrender and obedience. Is he Lord of your life or not?

Mary could have avoided the pain. No risk, no trouble with Joseph, no embarrassment, no birth pains in a stable, no running from Herod, living as refugees in Egypt. She could have said no, stayed in Nazareth, married Joseph, had a couple of kids and lived happily ever after. But oh, what Mary would have missed! What playing it safe would have cost her. "Mary, you could skip the pain and the sacrifice, but you'll miss the best, the greatest. You'll miss knowing God in a way that no one has ever known him or will ever know him. You could avoid the pain of birthing a child in stable, but you would miss the glory of holding the Son of God in your arms, cradling the One who cradled the stars as he flung them into space. To paraphrase the theologian Garth Brooks, "You could a missed the pain, but you'd a had to miss the dance."

Obedience and surrender may produce pain as the Spirit confronts our sinful and willful flesh but it's worth it all. Obedience is always a call to come up higher. It's a call to experience the grace and provision and glory of God like you've never experienced before. It's a call to be more than you could ever be, to accomplish more than you could ever accomplish on your own or by your own design. It's a call to experience God's very best, a call to align yourself with his plan, his kingdom, his way. You'll have to die to yourself, but you will be saying yes to an abundant and extraordinary life, walking in intimacy with the Savior. The call was made to Mary and to all of us as well. What'll it be? Yes or no?

Mary asks only one question. **“How will this be since I am a virgin?” Luke 1:34** Gabriel responds, **“The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you...for nothing is impossible with God.” Luke 1:35-37** That's all Mary needed to hear. Nothing is impossible with God. **“If I say yes, he'll take care of the rest!”**

Remember where Mary was in the context of Israel's history. There had been no prophet, no word from God. 400 years of silence and then an angel announces that God is with this teen-aged girl in Galilee and tells her nothing is impossible with God. I can imagine Mary thinking, “That's what the priests told me and what my mother and father told me. They recounted the stories of the miracles of the patriarchs and the prophets, but there has been no prophet for so long. There has been no good news. Our land is occupied by the Romans. Jews are being executed at the whim of the Emperor and the King. We wondered if God had forgotten his promise to Abraham and his descendants. Things look impossible. Maybe the days of miracles are past.” But the angel said nothing was impossible with God and that's all Mary needed to know. “If God can do the impossible, then he can make this happen as well and I can deliver this child. If nothing is impossible with God then I can say yes to all God has for me!”

And with that knowledge in her heart and mind, we hear Mary say these powerful words of surrender and commitment, **“I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me as you have said.” Luke 1:38** I like the King James Version: **“Behold the handmaiden of the Lord. Be it unto me according to thy word.”** (KJV) “It's a yes to you Lord. I surrender. I'll do what pleases and honors you. There may be trouble or pain but “be it unto me according to thy word.” Trust me when I tell you, you won't regret saying Yes to Jesus, Yes to the Father and his plans for your life!

Think about this. Mary said “Yes” without knowing the difference it would make. She knew what Gabriel said, but there was no way of understanding that her “yes” would mean salvation and eternal life for all of us, for millions of people. She couldn’t see the future, the results of her choice, her obedience to God. She didn’t know how much it would matter. All she could see was the importance of saying “yes” to what the Father asked of her. “Be it unto me according to your word” and that yes made all the difference.

Mary’s yes led to the miraculous birth of Jesus and to salvation and redemption for us and for the world. I don’t know what your yes will produce or where it will take you, but I can promise you, you won’t regret it. I challenge you today: submit your life to Christ the way Mary submitted her life to God. Trust him, even when what he is calling you to do looks impossible. Obey him even when it seems risky to do so. Surrender to him even when the cost seems great, for his call to you, to walk in obedience and surrender, to trust his promises and rely on his faithfulness, that call leads to victory for you and for others. Mary’s obedience made all the difference for the whole world. God alone knows the difference your yes will make.

Mary was unique, blessed, highly favored, chosen. But so are you. You’ve been blessed by God’s mercy and grace. He chose Mary to bear his Son and give birth to the Redeemer, but he chose you to receive life from the Son, to be born again into the kingdom of God. He chose you and called you his daughter, his son, his beloved. He has a plan and purpose for your life if you will surrender to him.

How do you respond to his call? Like Mary did so long ago. “I am the Lord’s servant. May it be to me as you have said.” “Lord, my answer is YES!” Like Mary, will you surrender your life and plans to him? Will you believe that what he has promised, what he has said to you, he will do? Will you commit your life and future to him today? Your yes can make all the difference in the world.