

**THE CAST OF CHRISTMAS**  
**A Young “Yes” to the Mystery: Mary**  
*Luke 1:35-56 2nd Sunday of Advent*  
*Auburn First United Methodist Church*  
*December 6, 2020*  
*The Reverend Dr. Mark Fenstermacher*

**The Feather on the Floor**

The story of the angel Gabriel’s visit to Mary is familiar to many of us. It’s read almost ever December. We’ve sat through more than a few children’s Christmas programs where some 6th or 7th grader, dressed in a white robe, stands on the worship platform and plays the part of Gabriel.

Usually, the young angel has a wobbly golden halo perched on the top of their head. The angel in the pageant, if it is a first class production, may also have a set of wings on each shoulder. My experience is that whatever the wings are made of, they tend to shed their feathers up and down the aisles of the church or all over the fellowship hall stage. The angel will often depend on some volunteer, kneeling in front of the first row of pews, to feed them their lines, “Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you!”

I remember, a couple of years ago, walking down the main hallway at Bloomington First. The children’s Christmas pageant had been presented the night before, on Sunday evening. It had been good and exhausting. Our children’s ministry volunteers were breathing a sigh of relief. They had survived the Christmas pageant!

In the middle of Monday, back in the regular rhythm of things, I was walking down the hallway at First Church in Bloomington, and I happened to look down at the floor and there was one, single, solitary, white feather. It had been left behind by the angel. The feather stopped me in my tracks. I smiled, bent down and picked up the feather, and thought, “Well, we may be done with the Christmas pageant but the feather tells me God isn’t done with us. God and the angels are still with us...”

I liked finding evidence of the holy, evidence of angels, evidence of the activity of God, in the middle of a Monday when I was walking down the hallway thinking about heaven knows what.

So we come to this story of the angel’s visit to a very young woman, in a backwater province of the Roman Empire, and it is familiar to many of us. But that doesn’t make it any less mysterious. No matter how many times we have heard it, the story in the 1st chapter of Luke raises questions, doesn’t it? We work hard to make sense of it but there is always a part of the story that eludes our attempts to make sense of it.

You may not be able to explain it, or understand all that it is, but can't you feel this deep, mysterious story pulling you into it?

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### **The Story of the Angel and the Young Girl**

So here is the story.

God sends an angel to a young woman who lives in an out-of-the-way place called Galilee. You may want to laugh off this talk of an angel being sent to the hill country of northern Galilee, but you also might want to be a little bit more open-minded about this talk of angels. Because they have this way of showing up in our lives: we all know that.

The angel God sends is named Gabriel. Which tells us God is sending the "A Team." There are two angels who are named in the Bible: one is Michael and the other Gabriel.

Luke tells us Gabriel is sent to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph. The word Hebrew "almah," that is translated as "virgin" in the English text, can also mean "young woman."

The virgin or young woman's name is Mary. Which can mean a variety of things. The name can mean "sea of bitterness" or "strong" or "rebelliousness" or "wished for child." The name can also come from a Egyptian word that is derived in part from the word "beloved" or "love." If you pay attention to the New Testament mentions of Mary, you won't find much evidence of bitterness or rebelliousness in what she says or what she does. So I find myself choosing to believe her name may mean "strong" or "beloved."

Gabriel tells this young woman, "Greetings, favoured one!" Which may have been more than a little unsettling. "The Lord is with you," Gabriel says.

Now, you may find that kind of message immensely comforting: "The Lord is with you." In fact, it is a message I often deliver to people who are going through deep water or feel as if they are wandering in some kind of personal wilderness: "The Lord is with you," I say. It sounds like something we need to hear right now because so many of us are exhausted, frustrated and overwhelmed. If we are not being swallowed up in the quicksand of despair, it certainly feels like we are on the edge of despair.

"The Lord is with you" may appear at first glance to be a wonderful thing to hear, but it might also be unsettling. For one reason, we may feel like the last person in the world who deserves to have the Lord setting up shop in our life. We're not worthy. We better take care of some things, clean up some messy corners, before we dare let the Lord get too close to us.

And the message may also be unnerving because if God is stepping into our life then we may assume -most likely correctly- that we are about to lose control of things.

Whatever plan we had for the way ahead is -if the Lord is with us- going out the window. You see this over and over again in the Bible. Mary, we can assume, would have known how the Lord stepped into Moses' life and complicated things in a big-time way. Mary would have known the story of the prophet, Jeremiah, and how God "tapped" him on the shoulder as a young man and that ended up with the prophet being ridiculed, attacked and shoved down into cistern to die. Mary would have known the story of Queen Esther who ended up risking her life, her security, her position, because God found her. God whispered to her through a relative who said she was born "for such a time as this." So Mary is unsettled by the message of the angel!

Luke tells us that Mary was much perplexed by his words and "what sort of greeting this might be." Which reveals something about Mary: she isn't good at pretending. She isn't good at hiding what she is thinking or feeling. She isn't going to let her desire to please cause her to swallow the truth.

I see Mary as a plain-spoken, no-nonsense, common-sense young woman from some place like Logansport, Indiana or Bemijidi, Minnesota or Van Wert, Ohio. She may be a first semester student at Ancilla Domini Junior College in tiny Donaldson, Indiana, and you may be named Gabriel with a Ph.D from Princeton or Cal Berkley, driving a top of the line Porsche, wearing a \$1,000 blazer and \$400 loafers, but that doesn't mean she is going to blindly buy whatever you are selling.

Gabriel tells Mary what angels almost always say when they show up: "Do not be afraid." Then, he explains that she has found favour with God. Gabriel tells Mary that she is going to conceive in her womb and "bear a son." She is to name the boy Jesus. The angel goes on to say: "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 for ever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." (:31-33)

Being a young woman in the back country of Galilee, having watched the murderous games that royal households play in palaces from Damascus to Jerusalem to Athens to Rome, it may not sound like good news that her son will be great and sit on the "throne of his ancestor David." If you are in the throne, then it is only a matter of time until your friends turn into your enemies as they lust for power. People are, if you sit on a royal throne, always trying to bring you down! Mary is puzzled and alarmed by what she is hearing.

"How can this be, since I am a virgin?" she asks. She is practical. She's not afraid to ask the obvious question. As you get to know Mary, you begin to realize her name may capture two essential qualities about her: she is God's beloved and she is strong. Mary doesn't blink and just nod when Gabriel begins to talk about a baby who will become king, but she pushes back...she asks questions.

The angel offers an explanation that only raises more questions. I know how that is. The other day I met with a Bible study group to explore the whole subject of the Holy Spirit. The members of the group would ask me a question, I would do my best to offer

an explanation, and I could see on the faces of some people that my answer only puzzled them even more.

Mary asked how in the world she is going to conceive since she hasn't had sexual relations with a man, and Gabriel says: "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."

I give Gabriel credit for trying to persuade Mary that the impossible can happen in her life because the impossible is happening right then in the life of her much older relative, Elizabeth. "If someone already signed up for AARP can be pregnant," Gabriel is saying, "you can believe what I am telling you. Unexpected and impossible things can happen in your life. Things happen. God works."

Here is the thing: every question Mary asks leads to an answer that only leads to more questions. The whole thing, the whole divine enterprise, is still a mystery. She doesn't understand how it is going to happen, she doesn't understand what it all means, she has no idea how in the world she will navigate what is ahead, there are all sorts of loose ends that Gabriel hasn't tied up, and Mary says "Yes."

### **Faith is Saying "Yes" even with Unanswered Questions**

Faith, this story reminds us, is always about taking the next step even when we have questions. Faith is about taking the next step with God even though our last question has led to another question. Faith is saying "Yes" to what God is asking even if we're not sure about every twist and turn in the journey.

Which, when you think about it, isn't so different from so much of life. If you stop and think about it, I suspect many of the best experiences in your life happened because you said "Yes" before you had any clear idea about what was ahead. I remember, a year or two ago, sitting with a young couple who had discovered they were pregnant with their first child. They were telling me what they were going to do, they were telling me how it was going to be, and I smiled inside. "You don't have a clue about what is ahead," I thought to myself as I looked at those two young adults, "and that's okay. That's how life is. We don't know every twist and turn, we don't have every answer before we begin, and still we say 'yes.'"

So the story of Mary and Gabriel is a good story for us to hear, I think. Because there are more than a few of us who have all sorts of questions about what will happen if we say "Yes" to God. More than a few of us have questions about what it would mean to go running after Jesus and let him be our Truth. We have questions. But faith is about saying "Yes" despite the questions.

I know you have questions. I know you'd like to know more. But God may show up in your life, as God showed up in Mary's life, inviting you into a bold, big, mysterious adventure: will you say "Yes?"

The story of Mary, Joseph and Gabriel may be a gift to you today, nudging you from a cautious "No" to a faithful, life-changing "Yes."

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### **The God Who Says "Yes"**

There is another message in this story. There is another sermon in the story of Gabriel's visit to Mary. *(Don't worry - this sermon is going to take just a minute or two...)*

This story in Luke's 1st chapter is a reminder that to live life with God, to have faith, is to say "Yes" despite the fact that all our questions have not been answered. We're asked to step into the story before we know everything about the story.

But it is something more: this story is not only about Mary "Yes" to God but it is about God's "Yes" to Mary and to this whole, beautiful, mess of a world. Mary is a young woman from a backwater town in the hills of northern Galilee, and God says "Yes" to her.

This moment gives us a glimpse into the heart of the God who chooses us, the God who comes to us, the God who decides to get involved in the mess and joy of our lives where we are. God chooses to bring life to Mary's womb. God chooses to bring life to Nazareth. God chooses to bring life to the wilderness of Judea where John will oneday baptize crowds hungry for a new beginning. God chooses to bring life to Simon, James and John. God chooses the lepers. God chooses the woman of the city who ends up anointing Jesus' feet with her tears because of her gladness at the grace she has found in him.

So the story in Luke 1 is about Mary's "Yes" to God, but it also about God's "Yes" to this broken, beautiful world that needs to be saved...made whole.

Kathy Asbery is a clinical psychologist. She says that at her house a typical day ends with one or both of the parents lying down at bedtime with the children to say goodnight, tell stories and pray with the kids. Kathy tells about being asked to tell the story of how they prayed for their daughter. "Tell me how you prayed for me for 10 and a billion years," their daughter says. "Tell me about how you had to fly so far away to get me but they wouldn't let you hold me until you got a bracelet and you cried. Tell me how you held me that first time and never let me go. Tell me how much your life didn't feel complete without your baby girl."

That's how it is several times a week. It's a story about a family's desire for a child and their love for that child before they even know who he or she is.

Kathy says that she and her husband feel that each of their four children were prayed for, each came into their lives with a story attached, and each was chosen.

Gabriel shows up and we see, again, how God says, "Yes." God chooses us. God chooses to move into the neighborhood and take up residence with us. It's amazing... just amazing.

As I hear God's "Yes" to Mary, as I come face-to-face with in God's "Yes" mysterious love for all, I find myself saying "Yes" to God despite all my unanswered questions. What happens in you when you study Mary's "Yes" to God and hear the story of God's decision to choose you?