A.M.D.G. 1st Sunday in Advent Text: Luke 1:26-38

 December 2nd, 2018

**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, favoured 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 favour 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 for ever, 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.

**Will The Real Mary Please Stand Up!**

Our reading today from Luke’s Gospel – known as the ‘Annunciation’ – is one of the most beloved scenes in the whole Christian story – an intimate moment between Mary and the angel Gabriel in which everything begins with a young girl’s ‘yes’ to God’s wild plan. Luke tells the story in 12 short verses. And art through the centuries has depicted her as demure and unresisting - her obedience easy. Neither the gospel nor the way she has been presented through time says anything about what the Annunciation must have cost her. But as I ponder her story again - nothing about Mary feels straightforward or easy. Despite our familiarity with her story, the mother of Jesus strikes me as a woman shrouded in mystery, a woman whose "yes" raises as many questions as it answers.

Part of the problem is that we've buried her under so many layers of theology, piety, and politics - she's nearly impossible to excavate. Catholics pray to her. Protestants tend to ignore her on principle. The Eastern Church knows her as "Theotokos," the God-bearer. Some call her a victim of divine coercion. And for some, she represents a troubling model of pious femininity — ever sinless, ever virgin, ever mother. For still others, she is child prophet — a young girl who fearlessly announces the arrival of God's kingdom to earth.

Would the real Mary please stand up? I wish she would, because I have so many questions to ask her.

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When did you tell your parents you were pregnant? How did they respond? Did you tell Joseph yourself, or did the gossips of Nazareth take care of that for you? Did anyone in the village believe your story? After the angel Gabriel departed, did you think it must have all been a dream?  Did you question your sanity? Did you fear for your life?

The story of the Annunciation is one of the most familiar ones in the New Testament.  "*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."* From this mind-boggling introduction, an even more mind‐boggling and rapid‐fire narrative follows.  The angel greets Mary, calling her God's "*favored one*." He describes the divine plan for a miraculous birth. Mary expresses doubt, Gabriel explains God's plan in greater detail, Mary consents, and the angel departs.

At least half of what's maddening about this story is how short it is. We know that Mary was "*much perplexed*" by Gabriel's words, and that she "*pondered*" his greeting. We know from her question - *"How can this be, since I am a virgin?"* - that she recognized the bizarre nature of the angel's announcement. And we know from her last words to the angel that she agreed to God's plan. But the Gospel writer leaves a great deal out. This Advent, my attention is particularly drawn to three gaps in this scripture passage.

The first is the gap between Gabriel's title for Mary - *"favored one*" - and the task he assigns her. Tradition tells us that Mary was probably thirteen or fourteen years old when the angel appeared to her. We know that in first‐century Jewish culture, a girl who became pregnant out of wedlock faced grave danger. At the very least, she became an object of widespread scorn. At the worst — as in contemporary cultures which practice honor killings — she risked being stoned to death by the very villagers who raised her. To say "yes" in this instance was to give herself over to scandal and gossip. It was to put *everything*— her reputation, her marriage - even her very ***life*** — on the line. And *this*is the special honor God bestows on his "favored one"? This gap in the Annunciation story warns me that God's "favor" is not the simple thing – the straight-forward blessing I'd like to believe it is.

Mary's favored status led her straight from scandal to danger to the trauma of her son's crucifixion. God's call required her to be profoundly countercultural - to trust an inner vision that flew in the face of everything her community expected of her. And even later - as the years passed, and her son's enemies multiplied, Mary's "yes" demanded a degree of courage that would make any mother tremble. Let's not deceive ourselves: it is no small thing to be favored of God!

As I ponder this story again, I cannot believe that she agreed to the angel’s plan without hesitation. I think she cannot have *helped* but struggle – and that her eventual "yes" is cautious and ambivalent. Indeed, I really hope she ***did*** take a long pause – because that’s what ***we*** surely would have done in her place!

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Weighing the pros and cons and giving some thought to the implications of her answer. That is – is we didn’t just turn and run away with terror at what the angel Gabriel was proposing. And I hope the angel waited compassionately for her answer, honoring all that was at stake in her freedom to accept or refuse him.

The third gap ends this week's reading: *"Then the angel departed from her."* This is a "gap" in my life with God that I both recognize and dread. It's the moment when the prayer ends, the vision recedes, the certainty wavers. It's the moment *after* the "yes," - the moment when the mountaintop experience fades into memory, and life in the valley begins. How different Mary's experience might have been if Gabriel had stuck around to erase her doubts and silence her critics. But no, he departed, leaving the ongoing work of discernment and discipleship – and the immediate fallout - to Mary alone. Her ‘yes’ was only the beginning.

A popular Christmas song addressed to Mary asks what she knew when she consented to Gabriel's request: *"Mary, did you know that your baby boy would one day walk on water?  Mary, did you know that your baby boy would save our sons and daughters?"* We have no way of knowing what Mary knew. My guess is that like us - she knew just enough to get started. My guess is that the work of being ‘Theotokos’ - bearing God into the world - involved ceaseless discovery, incredible joy, plenty of heartbreak and ongoing consent - just as it does today when we, too, agree to be ‘Theotokos – God bearers – opening ourselves so that God’s dreams, God’s plans, God’s love can grow inside us and be birthed to the world.

Meister Eckhart, writing in the 13th century, said: *“We are all meant to be mothers of God. What good is it to me if this eternal birth of the divine Son takes place unceasingly – but does not take place within myself? And, what good is it to me if Mary is full of grace if I am not also full of grace? What good is it to me for the Creator to give birth to His son, if I do not also give birth to him in my time and my culture? This, then, is the fullness of time: when the Son of God is begotten in me.”*

It is important to hear Mary’s story again and again each year – because it reminds us to be alert for God’s messengers – however and wherever they may be found in our days. It reminds us that God is continually inviting us to say ‘yes’ to whatever it is that God wishes to give birth in us. It is joining with Mary in being a theotokos – a God-bearer for our world – and following her in the joyful, difficult and blessed task of shining the light of God into the shadowed corners of the world.

*Greetings, favoured ones! The Lord is with you. Do not be afraid. For nothing is impossible with God!*