

Luke 1: 26-38

Preached at Stone Church of Willow Glen by Rev. Fred Harrell

Sunday, December 1, 2024

Mary Heard the Call. Will You?

He looked at me in shock. The fork he was holding went limp in his hand. I had just informed my then 11-year-old son about the birds and the bees. And then these words, that I will never forget. He looked around the diner filled with people. "Does everybody else around here know about this?" Yes, John Mark, they do. "Cool." And he resumed eating.

Mary can't believe what she is hearing either. She is completely rapt in her attention as an angel talks with her about intimate matters. She is a teenager. Probably 13 or 14. Living in military occupation.

My colleague, Broderick Greer, says, "It is difficult for people who have never experienced occupation to imagine the horror of having your autonomy and the autonomy of your people lost to a foreign military. You walk the streets of your village and there are soldiers standing at every intersection, soldiers who don't share your language, values, or taste in food; soldiers who view your body as one of the spoils of war; soldiers who can enter your home at any moment, to do whatever they will with your God-given dignity. No move that you make, no breath that you take goes unnoticed by the force that shouldn't be in your neighborhood in the first place."

And she's not in Jerusalem. She is in tiny, obscure, insignificant Nazareth. God has a habit of showing up in the least expected places.

"Don't be afraid," the angel says to Mary, and it's what they are always saying. It's what heaven has to say to earth. Don't be afraid.

"You have found favor with God," the angel tells Mary. God says the same thing to you. You are a child of God. And God has no disposition towards you other than unconditional, unwavering love. God favors you. Let go of the angry God image that got stuck in your head somewhere along the way. Just let it go. As Martin Luther said on Christmas Eve in 1532, "God is not at enmity with us human beings."

Because the angel comes from heaven to tell you you have favor with God. Mary heard it. I wonder if she said "I'm listening," "You have my attention. Now convince me."

“You will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him ‘Yahweh’s Salvation,’ — Yeshua, Jesus — and His kingdom will never end,” the angels say to Mary. Mary could hear and accept but never imagined how it would happen or what that Kingdom would look like. Imagine how she tries to grasp and think about that. She can’t help but get it wrong. The royal line is now in Herod’s house, not David’s house.

Mary believes what she can’t understand. “Faith seeking understanding,” as Augustine put it. We believe much more than we understand. We confess the mystery each week! I understand Christ has died, and I sorta understand Christ has risen. Very confused about how Christ comes again. I don’t have to understand it, but I can believe it.

Mary has questions. Heaven is not afraid of questions. This church isn’t either. And Mary’s question is very personal. “How can this be since I’m a virgin?”

Wil Gafney, in an article entitled “Did Mary Have a ‘me too moment,’”

In a world that did not necessarily recognize her sole ownership of her body this very young woman had the dignity, courage, and temerity to question a messenger of the Living God about what would happen to her body before giving her consent. That is important. Before Mary said, “yes,” she said, “wait a minute, explain this to me.”

“The Holy Spirit will come upon you/overshadow you.” Luke specifically says this is the work of the Holy Spirit.

And what was Mary’s answer? She doesn’t say anything like, “I am not worthy,” or “I don’t know how I’m going to do this.” What she says is, “Here am I.” Echoing Abram, echoing Isaiah. It’s a strong response. It’s a consensual response, it’s a response of faith and courage. It is fierce.

Let’s apply this shall we?

#1 Mary’s Yes and Yours. Mary had to trust that God is at work even when she can’t see it or how it’s going to play out. She doesn’t understand, but she can accept it. I mean, a few verses later (next week’s sermon) Elizabeth calls Mary blessed and Mary sings that for generations to come people will call her blessed. I wonder? Did she feel blessed being scrutinized as others saw her unwed belly growing? Did she feel blessed giving birth in a cave? Did she feel blessed when her heart dropped realizing she left her 12-year-old in Jerusalem? Did she feel blessed when they lifted him up?

She said yes not based on the expectation of things being awesome for her but based on the expectation that God can create something out of nothing. Can you ask God today for that kind of 'yes'?

Christmas itself isn't about getting what you want, or making sure you're giving others what they want. To experience Christmas is to trust that God can do this thing again. God can again be born in me, in you, in this broken mess of a gorgeous world.

In the 4th century St. Gregory of Nyssa wrote, "What was achieved in the body of Mary will happen in the soul of everyone who receives the Word." We are all invited to say 'yes' to birthing something holy from God in this world that brings healing and restoration. It's not like Bethlehem, while unique, is the only place God brought something holy into the world through a human being who would cooperate! It happens when children are taught and loved...when greeters welcome... when pastors listen and pray. When you feed the poor, when you share your resources, when you move toward that friend in depression, when you make room in your life to listen to God, holy things are still being birthed in this world by those who say 'yes' to God.

#2 Mary's Identity and Yours. I think God, through the angel Gabriel, grounded Mary's own identity in God's love. "Favor with God." Her soul felt its worth. And other opinions now became secondary. And so, "let it be with me according to your word" turns out to be the most liberating thing she could possibly say. I will allow you, God, to determine my worth. Not the word of my friends at school; not the word of my GPA; not the word of my bank statement; not the word of social media; not the word of my family; not the word of society. You alone, God, will determine my worth.

The first "yes" is God's yes to us. To you. A yes that walked among us full of grace and truth and who died and on the third day rose again. A yes that is offered to you in bread and wine every week so that you can become what you receive. When you are trying to decide what to listen to, tune out the static of all other claims. May it be with you only according to God's will. May your soul feel it's worth.

And when you do? You may also ask "Does everybody else around here know this?"

Let us pray.

God of covenantal love. Teach us by your Spirit to pray, "Let it be with me according to your word." Show us how to say "here am I, your servant," without pretense, and with a spirit of sacrificial love. All for the sake of the world you so love. In Jesus' name. Amen.