

The Courage to Keep Saying Yes
Good Shepherd, Burke
Sermon for Advent 4, Year B
December 24, 2017
The Rev. Leslie E. Chadwick

2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16 Canticle 15 Romans 16: 25-27 Luke 1: 26-38

Five, four, three, two, one: Christmas!

Zero days left for shipping.

Maybe hours, but the seconds are fast ticking away.

Perhaps there's time for a last-minute trip to the grocery store for a forgotten ingredient, but the time for baking and meal-planning is quickly running out.

The church has its own reverse countdown.

One candle, two, three, now four.

Today marks the final week of Advent compressed into less than a day.

Tonight, the candles switch to white, and Christmas comes again.

Yet here you are.

You have set aside some of your precious time to come to church.

To hear the story of what happens before we get to the manger.

In some ways, our lectionary today winds that story up as tight as a coil. God's promise to David to make his house and legacy sure forever; the Magnificat; the Mystery of the Incarnation condensed into the last paragraph of Romans; and the Annunciation.

On this 4th Sunday of Advent, in these few moments we have together, I'd like us to unwind. To uncoil Mary's part in this amazing story and sit with it. To let it expand us.

The angel Gabriel's visit to Mary isn't the first one he makes that year. He comes first to a priest called Zechariah a few towns away. Zechariah's visitation is almost identical in form to Mary's, but the contrasting details make all the difference. Zechariah is terrified when he sees Gabriel. Mary is scared, too. She's much perplexed by the angel's words and ponders what sort of greeting this might be. Gabriel commands both of them, "Do not be afraid." Then he tells them the plan. Each of them will have a child. Zechariah, John the Baptist. Mary, Jesus. The angel describes God's plan not in bite-sized bullet points, but in expansive terms—the birth, the naming of the child, the child's greatness, what he will mean to them, to the world and to the people of God. Then he lets them respond.

Zechariah asks, "How do I know this isn't fake news? We're old!" Gabriel is deeply offended. For one thing, Zechariah is getting what he prayed for. He and his wife have wanted this baby for decades. For another, Zechariah questions the credentials of the messenger. The angel tells him, "Look. I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to give to you, you little peon, this good news. Because you didn't believe it, you'll be mute until the day it all comes to pass."

With Mary, it goes differently. She asks in genuine confusion, “How can this be, since I am a virgin?” Gabriel tells her that Holy Spirit will overshadow her, that her child will be holy. He gives her something concrete to hold onto. A sign. Her cousin Elizabeth, Zechariah’s barren wife, is finally pregnant. Nothing will be impossible with God.”

Gabriel’s explanation is hardly comforting. The Angel doesn’t detail what will happen with Joseph who has the right to stone her for adultery if she’s found pregnant not by him. The angel doesn’t detail who will support her in raising this baby in near poverty. But Mary accepts God’s vision, and says, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord, let it be with me according to your word.”

You could interpret this response as submissive. Mary is a poor, quiet teenager accepting her fate. She accepts God’s will because, let’s face it, everyone else’s will overrides hers in her world. She’s a woman at the lowest strata of her society, not even a full citizen. (Kuja, December 6, 2017). Yet Mary’s, “Yes” is full of power and courage. I imagine that some difficult moments passed after the angel left. Mary is left with herself, with a God who is sometimes hard to see, and this huge event that will change her life. I imagine a pit in her stomach as she wonders, “What have I just done? How can I know I’ve made the right decision? Not that talking with the angel was really a discussion. It was more of a ‘this is how it is’ conversation. But why then, did I say, ‘Here am I’ and offer myself to God’s word?”

Mary runs as fast as she can with the one concrete detail the angel gave her to hold onto. Elizabeth’s house. And when she gets there, she doesn’t have to explain a thing. Elizabeth hears Mary’s greeting and cannot contain the joy within her: “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me! As soon as I heard you, the baby inside me leaped for joy! And blessed are you who believed there could be a fulfillment of what was spoken to you by the Lord!”

Only then, in the warmth of her cousin’s affirmation, support and unbridled joy, can Mary claim her own full joy, her “yes.” The song that she sings, “The Magnificat,” has been banned around the world: in India during British colonial rule, in El Salvador and Guatemala in the 1980s, in Argentina to suppress mothers of disappeared children. (Kuja, December 6, 2017) Mary’s song is no timid response to God’s plan; it’s “subversive... raw, wild, and courageous.” (Kuja, December 6, 2017) She sees in this moment the full scope of the good news not only for her, but for all of the people on the bottom: the hungry, the poor, the lowly, the oppressed. She trusts that God will topple the proud and powerful, send the rich away empty, and keep his promise to David.

Today, in this hour of Advent 4, Mary reminds us that the promise of “God with us” gives us courage to do a new thing. It gives us courage to say a “yes” not to please someone intimidating in the moment. But courage to be present to God’s word day in and day out, knowing that God himself will be with us to carry his purpose out. Along the way, he will give us support and encouragement. It might come in the form of spiritual friends who ask not, “What were you thinking?” but who say instead, “Blessed are you!” It might come in the form of shepherds, wise men, or elders. On the long, lonely days in between when we have trouble seeing God and wonder if we’re on the right track, we can return to this promise, “You can’t go wrong. You can’t fall outside of God’s love” (Gail Epes, c.f. Churchill Gibson).

Like Mary, let's say, "Yes" to God's Word made flesh in our lives this season. Let's be open to whatever new thing he's calling us to do in response to his Word. Lets' say, "Yes" not only in the candlelit glow of Christmas, but day in and day out. Whatever God calls us to do in his name has power to bring good news not only to us, but to the whole world. And as you leave, know this: "Blessed are you who believe that there can be a fulfilment of what is spoken to you by the Lord."

Amen.

