

“Favored One?”

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Luke 1:26-38

“In the sixth month of 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, favored 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 favor 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 forever, 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. “

For these four weeks of Advent, we are exploring four perspectives of the Nativity Story. Last week, Bill talked about Joseph and the importance of his role to the whole Nativity story. And this week, it should not be a big shock that I will focus on Mary.

It should be no surprise to you that I have a fondness for Mary. Of all the pieces of my family’s nativity set, it is Mary who shows the most wear, for I spent hours playing with her and our nativity. Mary, in her blue robe and blue scarf was always placed front and center, Joseph by her side, both gazing into the manger where baby Jesus lay. I celebrated that Mary and I shared the same name and that we both looked good in blue. I loved that she got to ride the donkey – although now, after having two children of my own, I continue to question how she ever got up on that donkey at nine months pregnant – but at four or five years old, riding a donkey sounded pretty cool. I loved so much about Mary but, I think the most powerful part was here in one of the most pivotal stories in Scripture; a young woman played a crucial role. You see, our bible is written from a patriarchal perspective. Meaning, it is written by men at a time when women’s roles were subservient and prescribed. So, men are the predominant and primary characters with a few women sprinkled in here and there. *Quora.com* says there are 3,427 named people in the Bible and only 5-8% of those – or about 225 of those are women. But every once in a while, there is a woman who enters the picture and plays a vital role in our Biblical history. In the Nativity story, there is one woman who shows-up. And while it is easy to diminish her role to solely the act of child bearing, to do so misses the entire point. Mary plays a much larger role, one that impacts and involves every one of us – male and female. Yep, there is something about Mary.

Mary is a young girl who is going about her daily routine when Gabriel appears and says, “Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.” In our Old Testament history, we know that while angels do appear to humans throughout Scripture, those appearances are not frequent. We also know that when they do, the recipient is understandably on edge as the news the angel is bringing is often troubling. So, when Gabriel shows-up on Mary’s doorstep, she silently questions why this angel stands before her, an ordinary, young, impoverished woman, living in a small rural town. And he calls her “favored one”? Does this angel have the right person? How is an angel before her and speaking to her? Angels don’t come to ordinary, lowly, peasant girls...do they?

Then the angel speaks again, “Do not be afraid., Mary, for you have found favor with God.” Favored one? Favor with God? This young woman has no social, economic or religious status. She comes from a small ordinary town and lives an ordinary life. She is not a person of privilege or power, nor has she done anything to earn the favor of God. How is she “favored”?

During Mary and Joseph’s time, the church leaders believed that favor was shown through persons who possessed wealth and power and success. Mary’s simple life would have been deemed anything but favored. But in God’s world, “favored” refers to God’s grace. If you have favor with God, God has imparted God’s grace upon you. God imparts God’s grace freely and independently of any actions on our part - which runs counter to any other understanding. God – out of God’s unconditionally given grace - chooses Mary. God favors Mary. And in doing so, invites Mary to

participate in the impossible that is about to happen in the world not because of anything she has done but simply because God chose her - an ordinary run-of-the-mill woman - to participate in God's daring plan.

What is that plan? The angel continues and reveals God's plan to Mary that she is to bear the Son of God to the world. And I love her response, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" Maybe a better translation is: "I'm sorry, what?!?!? You need me to do what? How on earth would this work? I am engaged. Will Joseph want to marry me if I am pregnant? Will he leave me? Will I be stoned to death as other women of my time are who are in my situation? Will my family disown me? How will I care for this child? Will I even survive the childbirth? How on earth will this work? "How can this be?"

But the angel is prepared. He knows what he is asking is unusual. It is unheard of. It is risky. But God prepared him. He offers more information but still sparse details. He shares the connection Mary's baby will have with her cousin Elizabeth's son and then delivers my favorite one-line summary in all of Scripture, "For nothing will be impossible with God." And Mary's response, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord"; with those words, the world changed.

Hmmmm ... see how God does that. God calls a simple, young, ordinary woman – the unlikeliest of people - and transforms her into one of the most courageous and powerful women – I'm sorry, one of the most courageous and powerful people in our entire Biblical story. Mary's "yes" enables God to break into our world in the most powerfully ordinary manner – birth; but, it does so much more. Through Mary's "yes" we see a model of what saying "yes" to God means for all of us. Not that we are asked to carry Jesus – for that was a once-in-a-lifetime miracle that was unique to Mary – but her "yes" shows us how to answer "yes" to the life of discipleship that we did not necessarily intend. We can fight it kicking and screaming, or we can choose to accept the change of plans with grace and dignity letting go of our own plans and issues ... and letting God lead us into the mysterious and unexpected life that God intends.

Author and pastor Barbara Brown Taylor puts it this way:

Like Mary, our choices often boil down to yes or no; yes, I will live this life that is being held out to me or no, I will not. Yes, I will explore this unexpected turn of events or no, I will not. If you say no, you will likely spend the next several years fighting it. You may spend all of your time and energy trying to escape from the very thing you are called to do and be. Or you can say yes. You can decide to (take a risk). You can decide to take part in a plan you did not choose, doing things you do not know how to do for reasons you do not entirely understand. You can take part in a thrilling and dangerous scheme with no script and no guarantees You can agree to smuggle God into the world inside your own body.ⁱ

Yes, you can choose to bear Christ to the world.

Saying "yes" to God does not mean life will be easy or without fear; it actually means not letting fear stop you or keep you from trying. Bearing Christ to the world means saying "yes" even when we have no idea what we will find, if we will be welcomed, or who we may encounter. But, Bearing Christ to the world means trusting that with God nothing will be impossible not even the power of transformative love that grows from a tiny, vulnerable, innocent baby that carries the salvation of the world on his shoulders.

Mary's "yes" allowed God to break into the world and bring the hope to a world so desperately in need. Could God have chosen another way? Absolutely! But God didn't. God chose Mary ... and today God chooses us and chooses to "invade our ordinary lives giving us our own chance to say "yes" - our own chance to bear the light of hope that broke into our world so many Christmases ago. God chooses to work *with* us. To work *through* us. To call to us again and again saying, "Greetings, favored ones! The Lord is with you. Do not be afraid. For nothing will be impossible with God."

All glory, power, and dominion are yours this day, O God. Amen.

ⁱJones, Victoria Emily. "Saying Yes to the Angel in the Room" <https://thejesusquestion.org/2012/12/10/saying-yes-to-the-angel-in-the-room/> December 2012.

With inspiration from the following:

Taylor, Barbara Brown. "Mothers of God" from Gospel Medicine. Crowley Publications, Lanham, Maryland. 1995. Pp. 165-167.

Lewis, Karoline. RCL Lectionary: Commentary on Luke 1:26-38.

http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1148