

Sermon for Sunday, December 18, 2011 Advent IV Luke 1:26-38, 46-55 "Say Yes"

One of the most remarkable parts of the story of Jesus' birth is often overlooked. In today's Gospel, it nearly slips past us.

Oh, it's very familiar, this story. Our children told it to us last week in the pageant. Mary is puttering around the house, tending to the chores that her mother has asked her to complete. She's daydreaming about her forthcoming wedding, to Joseph. He is a little older than she is, but that's alright. She has never much liked the boys her own age – too involved in proving themselves, showing off, getting into trouble playing silly pranks. No, she is happy that Joseph is her betrothed. He's solid, quiet. He has a good business as a carpenter. He will provide well for her and for any children they might have.

Suddenly she senses someone or something in the room with her. Is it a small animal that has wandered in? Is it her mother? But when she turns to look, she sees that this is not what she expected. An angel – how could it be anything else, with those piercing eyes and powerful wings? – stands there. Mary should be frightened, but she realizes that this is someone who cares for her. His glance is calm and strong but loving. And he has a message for her, a message from God:

"Hello, there, Mary. You are special to God, and you need to know that God is with you."

Mary is confused now. What does this mean? The angel seems to understand that, so he explains:

"Don't be afraid. God loves you and has a plan for you. You will have a child, conceived through the Holy Spirit. You'll name him Jesus, and he will be God's Son, a true descendant of David. All God promised to David will be fulfilled in this child."

Well, the angel's words only make Mary more confused. "I can't be pregnant. I haven't been with any man. I know how it works, and you need to be with a man to have a baby."

The angel smiles softly. "It isn't a man who will make you pregnant. It's God. God will send his Holy Spirit into you and you will bear God's very own son. And just in case you don't believe that God can make anything possible, hear this: your cousin Elizabeth, who has been unable to have a child for her whole life and who is now quite old, is going to have a child. God makes the impossible happen."

All the color drains from Mary's face as she starts to realize that this is real. And then slowly, her cheeks turn pink and she smiles. And she answers, "Yes, I am God's servant. I will do this thing."

And that last sentence, that last statement by Mary, that's the remarkable thing I want us to think about today. Mary makes a choice.

Yes, the angel comes with word of what God has planned.

But she understands that she has the right to say no. She has a choice.

And this untutored teenage girl from Nazareth makes that choice, and says "Yes."

"Yes" to God and this plan to bear a child by supernatural means, a child who is not Joseph's but God's, a pregnancy that will undoubtedly cause the gossips in town to wag their tongues.

"Yes" to a situation that is unprecedented, to things that she cannot imagine, a future unlike what she and Joseph had anticipated.

All because this girl has made a choice.

She has said "yes" to God's plan. The writer Madeleine L'Engle wrote about Mary's decision in sharp words:

*This is the irrational season
When love blooms bright and wild.*

*Had Mary been filled with reason
There'd have been no room for the child.*

And she responds to this surprising visit from the angel, with his proposal from God and her affirmation, by singing a song, the Canticle we recited this morning in place of the psalm. This song is called the Magnificat, and seems to reinforce just how irrational Mary's choice is.

My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord, my spirit rejoices in God my Savior; for he has looked with favor on his lowly servant. From this day all generations will call me blessed: the Almighty has done great things for me, and holy is his Name.

Mary is celebrating, is amazing and grateful that God has chosen her to do this thing. She sounds a bit proud, doesn't she, with her comment that "all generations will call me blessed."

She goes on to celebrate all that God has done for God's people. Amazing that she would say that: isn't life hard for God's people, under Roman rule? But she names God's goodness, and God's faithfulness in the divine promises. She understands that this thing that is happening to her, this thing to which she has consented, is fulfillment of that promise.

But in her youth, her inexperience, she does not know how it will change her, how it will break her heart even as it causes her to rejoice. All she knows, poor girl, is that God has chosen her for something unimaginable, and she is grateful.

It is an irrational choice, as L'Engle says, but what a beautiful one!

It isn't just Mary who is given choices by God, though. Each of us is given such choices. Isn't that the whole point of being given the gift of free will by our Creator? Aren't we all given brains and hearts to evaluate and decide if we will do something or not, whether that something is a good thing or a bad thing?

But do we face those choices squarely, and make our decision, as Mary did when Gabriel showed up in her house? Or do we simply let circumstances play out as they will, stuck in our fears or immobilized by confusion, thus missing the opportunity to make a life-changing, world-changing choice offered to us by God?

Make no mistake, God has plans for each of us, just as God did for Mary. And that leaves us with a responsibility. When we sense that God has in mind for us, do we assent or do we say no? Do we worry that it isn't really God, that little voice in our heart, that it's just too much eggnog? Do we fear that we'll make the wrong choice, so it's safer just to do nothing? Do we think "nah, God wouldn't want me to do this important thing?"

And yet who was it to whom God sent the angel? Not a queen, not a prophetess. Just a poor Jewish girl with little education and even less resources, engaged to a carpenter in a little town in the Galilee.

And when God sent that angel, Mary didn't say "well, gee, there must be some mistake. I'm not important enough to do this thing. Gabriel must have knocked on the wrong door."

No. She said yes. She said "my spirit rejoices in God my Savior; for he has looked with favor on his lowly servant." She knew that God can do unbelievable things, just as he had done for her cousin Elizabeth, and God was doing it once again, through her. Even her, little Mary.

God can do unbelievable things through us. Even us, here in this church in Virginia in 2011. God has a plan for you. It is time to be brave as Mary. Are you irrational enough to assent?

It's your choice. Why not say yes?

Amen.