

ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH
COMPASS, PA

December 24, 2023 – ADVENT 4, YR. B

The Rev. Dr. Nina George–Hacker

Homily: “*With Mary, All Believers are Christ-Bearers*”

2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16 (God promises to build His house and kingdom forever)
Canticle 3 (BCP 50) (Mary praises God for all He has done for her)
Romans 16:25-27 (Praise to God who alone is wise and able to strengthen us)
St. Luke 1:26-38 (The Angel Gabriel appears to the Virgin Mary)

“Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.”

In today’s Gospel reading, we see the power and beauty of Advent focused on a single exchange between the Angel Gabriel and a young woman named Mary. God sent the Archangel Gabriel to a town in Galilee called Nazareth. No place on earth could have been more ordinary. Gabriel came not to Jerusalem, nor to Rome, but to a village on the edge of the Empire; not to the wife of Herod, nor to the wife of Caesar—who believed himself to be a god—but to a small-town girl who was engaged to a carpenter. Infinite God reaches out to finite humanity in the person of Mary, whose Hebrew name is *Miryam*, and who was likely just a teenager. With Mary, as with us, God takes the initiative. He makes the first move. We don’t find Him. He finds us.

Mary is the faithful one who believes the promises made to her by the Lord will be fulfilled. She is the lowly handmaiden, the obedient servant; the one person most prepared to empty herself in order to receive the Lord. And God knew that. In fact, He created her for that purpose.

Gabriel doesn’t mince words. He gets straight to the point: “You will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus [or, in Hebrew, *Yeshua*]. 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... For nothing will be impossible with God.” After some initial practical questioning (“Umm, you do know I’m a virgin, right?”), Mary responds: “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.”

When God calls us to be, or do, or say that which He requests, how do *we* respond? What do *we* say? *Sometimes* we answer enthusiastically, “Yes, Lord, here am I.” But perhaps more often we are reluctant. If so, we’re in good company. The prophet Jeremiah complained, “I’m too young.” The prophet Isaiah protested, “I’m a man of unclean lips.” Gideon, the Warrior, lamented, “Surely you don’t mean me.” Moses grumbled, “I stutter; send someone else to Pharaoh.” And the prophet Jonah sailed off in the total opposite direction of where God was sending him.* When God called *me* to be a pastor, I answered, “Wrong number!” and tried to dodge Him for almost a full year.

The only person in the Bible who seems to have more-or-less immediately said “Yes” to God is Mary: “Let it be with me according to your word.” Her faith in God and His love for her was strong. After all, could anyone who didn’t believe completely in God’s love have said, “Yes”? And with Mary’s “Yes,” God was able to bring His gift, Jesus, into the world so that all people whom He created might be saved from sin, death, and hell.

St. Luke writes that Mary was “perplexed” by what the Angel said to her. Deciding to say “yes” to God does not mean Mary wasn’t afraid. It does mean she was unwilling to let fear stop her from what she knew in her heart was right. Mary was troubled. We, too, can be troubled for good reason when called by the Lord to a new way of seeing, doing, thinking, or speaking out, which *can be* risky and uncertain—not to mention, badly received by others. Advent is the season of God’s invitation to renew our faith that we might live new lives in Him.

St. Augustine, a 4th-century North African bishop, philosopher and theologian, wrote: “Mary was more blessed in accepting the *faith* of Christ than in conceiving the *flesh* of Christ. To someone who said [to her], ‘Blessed is the womb that bore you,’ Jesus replied, ‘Rather, blessed are they who hear the word of God and keep it.’ Finally, for His brothers, His relatives according to the flesh who did not believe in Him, of what advantage was that relationship? Even her maternal relationship would have done Mary no good unless she had borne Christ more happily in her heart than in her flesh.”⁺

As Christmas approaches, will we, too bear Christ happily in our hearts, that we might share Him with others? In the Greek Orthodox Church, Mary’s title is “Theotokos,” meaning “God Bearer.” As believers, each and every one of us is given the opportunity to be a *God-bearer*, as Mary was. We are invited to carry God in the Person of His Son Jesus Christ to everyone we encounter, offering Him to them through our thoughtfulness, kindness, generosity, and caring concern. We bear Jesus to others when we show forgiveness and unconditional love, when we respect and treat people with dignity, and when we are patient and understanding of those who might otherwise disturb or annoy us.

When Mary said, “Yes,” the world was changed forever and for all time. To us she is a paramount example of what can happen when we accept the reality that God *wants to* notice, favor, and bless *us*. We, too, can change the world through saying “Yes,” to God’s will and plan for our lives. When we say “Let it be with me according to your word,” in response to the Lord’s invitation, the angels in heaven rejoice and Christ is born anew within our hearts—not for us to keep Him all to ourselves, but so that we may share Him with others.

“Greetings, favored ones! The Lord is with you.” Say “Yes!” to God, as Mary did, because God has great hopes and dreams for you, too! His Holy Spirit is with you and He will guide you in all your ways, that you may be a blessing to this world. *Amen*.

* Adapt. T. Birch Rambo, “Sermon for Advent 4B” 18 December 2020, [Episcopal Church of the Resurrection, Eugene OR](https://resurrectioneugene.org/sermon-for-advent-4-december-20-2020-b-2/) <<https://resurrectioneugene.org/sermon-for-advent-4-december-20-2020-b-2/>> 12 December 2023. Used with permission.

+ Augustine of Hippo, “Quotes about Jesus_Christ-Birth-Incarnation,” [GraceQuotes.org](https://gracequotes.org), n.d. <https://gracequotes.org/topic/jesus_christ-birth-incarnation/> 18 December 2023. Used with permission.