

Advent 2C 2018, Luke 1:26-38, December 9, 2018, Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Lancaster, Pa., Kurt S. Strause

In the sixth month 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, "What? Oh, not now. This isn't a good time. I'm going to start classes at Nazareth Community college in January and then transfer to the University of Jerusalem in the fall. I'm going to study music composition and lyrics. My family tells me I have some talent. My career goals don't include a lot of time for religious stuff. Come back in a few years after I've gotten my career started and I might listen to you then."

Imagine if this was Mary's response to the angel Gabriel. The story would be vastly different. Would God have moved on until another young woman could be found? Might the story have ended there; no birth, no savior, no cross, no salvation?

We hear the Christmas story and all its elements as so very predictable and so very inevitable. The shepherds and the wise men, the angels in the heaven and animals in the barn re-appear year after year, like Christmas ornaments unwrapped after being packed away last January. Our expectations depend upon repeating all the familiar elements; and woe to that person who messes up the pattern. Don, the owner of Honeysuckle Hill where we get our church's Christmas tree is fond of telling me. "There are three things you need to get right in church; weddings, funerals, and Christmas." I couldn't help but agree. So, does it even make any sense to speculate that Mary might have said no?

That depends, I suppose, on how what you think about the stories in the Bible. If you believe that God not only knows everything that's going to happen before it happens, but even wills it to happen before it happens, then such speculation is not only not necessary, its downright unfaithful. Many people believe questioning events in history is the same as questioning God and God's divine plan. Many of us cannot possibly conceive of a God who is not completely in charge. And yes, even those horrible and evil events; the tragic death of a loved

one, the Holocaust, are chalked up to the divine plan, although they may be hidden from our understanding.

There is another way of reading the Bible. A way more in keeping with the way the authors wrote. For most of the stories in the Bible are conceived as drama. A good drama has characters and plots, sub-plots and dramatic twists and turns. As the drama unfolds you realize the action could go in any number of different directions. Surprising events overtake characters and the action moves in another direction. But there comes a time when the story reaches a climax and all the elements come together in a satisfying whole. You couldn't have predicted the ending, but once you see it you realize that's how it had to be.

I like to think of the stories in the Bible this way, including the story of Mary. Instead of thinking of her response as inevitable imagine something quite different. Imagine that moment, that split second of time after Gabriel's announcement and her response. Picture all the angels in heaven, and all creation for that matter, collectively holding their breath. What will she say? Will the savior be born? Will this be the time? Will the world know hope and freedom and joy? Or will it live in darkness for another hundred, thousand, ten thousand years? Waiting. Holding. Joy, or sorrow?

Mary said yes. But don't think of her yes as just one more predictable element of a too familiar story. Hold your breath. See the world's salvation for what it is, joyous surprise and a wonder-inducing message.

And now, beginning to think this way, hear the angel's voice in your own ears. "Greetings, favored one. The Lord is with you! God is calling you. Calling you to a life of profound and deep joy. Calling you to walk with Jesus one a journey. You may not know what might be around the corner, but you can trust he will always be walking with you."

The moment Mary said "yes" to Gabriel's announcement the world became a different place. Take a moment and contemplate that. Before Mary said yes, the world was one way. And after she said yes, the world was transformed. Before she said yes the world was yearning, longing, but not knowing. When she said yes the world's salvation began to take shape within her. God's Great Yes to a world that so often said no to God in the past began to grow and take shape. God's Yes born in Jesus began when Mary said yes nine months before.

Each time we respond to the call of God the world becomes a different place as well. Different because Christ is born anew in us. In our words, in our actions, we bear Christ to the world. We become the servants of the Lord, willing participants in God's plan of salvation of the world. Our yes to God is part of God's Yes to the world.

That's how Luke, our gospel writer, wants us to see these very real people he tells us about in this first chapter. Last week we met Zechariah, going about his

business in the Temple. He stumbles a bit when Gabriel comes to him with the message. We still have yet to see how that all turns out. Wait two more weeks and you will. There's his wife Elizabeth who so longed for a child until she had all but given up longing. They all eventually say "yes" to God and the world becomes a different place.

In the same way God comes into our lives, gracefully, gently, respecting our freedom and our humanity. His invitation is never coercive. It's a quiet, often persistent, nudging, always full of grace and love. We can listen to his call, sometimes for years, before we do anything about it. Still, it's there, always bidding us onward, always calling us to a life of deep and profound joy.

For centuries Mary has been a model of faith. Martin Luther saw Mary's yes to the angel as a yes to God. And he saw that yes as a miracle, an act of God's grace at work in the life of Mary. In the same way every yes we say to God is also an act of grace. Because saying yes to God is what we call faith, and faith itself is a gift and a gift is always an act of God's grace. So faith itself is a miracle. And that's what Christmas is all about, the miracle of God's yes to a world that waits in longing and hope. Amen.