

Sermon 12-22-19
Paul Purdue preaching

Mary Says “Yes” - December 22, 2019

After my niece and nephew moved out, my youngest son spent the summer in my childhood home. A few days after Caleb moved back into the dorm, Connie drove to Lexington to see him. In Nashville, asleep on our couch, the phone woke me at 11pm. Connie blurted out, “It is raining in the house! It is raining in your mom’s house!” Groggy and confused, I asked, “What?” “It is raining in your mothers’ house! The door is stuck. It’s raining in the house!” Now awake but confused, I suggested, “Go get Harry.” Harry and Linda moved across from my folks 40 years ago. A half-asleep Harry greeted Connie who immediately began a second panicked verse, “The ceiling is on the floor! The ceiling is on the floor!” Harry asked, “What?” Connie answered, “Joann’s...the ceiling is on the floor!” Harry answered, “Let me get my shoes.” The light of their phones revealed separate quarter-inch creeks converging by the back door before cascading into the basement. It was raining in the house. They dared not flip on a light, as water filled the fixtures. Seeking to reach the headwaters upstairs a swollen door resisted opening. When Harry and Connie retreated to retrieve a crowbar, Linda, a bit mechanically declined, turned the doorknob the other way and gained entry. A clean water line had been spraying water like a garden hose. The day after, I drank Linda and Harry’s coffee on Mom’s patio. I tried to conjure up happier memories of Dad talking about the news or Mom praising the glory of a robin nesting in the Japanese maple, when suddenly, the house shook with a crashing sound. All the living room ceiling was now on the floor.

Life brings us moments when we just shake our heads and ask, “How can this be?” If you have been watching the news this week, you likely have asked, “How can this be?” At times we may get grades, diplomas, opportunities or setbacks that stirred feelings of “What is next?” Life holds losses, lies, and leavings that beg “How did we get here?” A family meal or an office happening can lead us to ask God, friends, or our core, “How can they say that?”

From the moment the angel appeared, Mary wondered what was going on. She asks a universal question, “How can it be?” Her asking reminds me of Moses’ questions when called to lead a slave uprising, “Who am I that I should go up against Pharaoh? Lord, don’t you know I am slow of speech,” not to mention an outstanding warrant? Mary asks herself and God, “How can I be pregnant? How can this be a good plan?”

The Bible affirms questioning. In plotting resistance, Mordicia asks Ester, “Perhaps, for a moment just like this, you have come to royal power?” Zechariah asked, “How can I be sure, for Elizabeth and I are old?” Reading along we ask how could the Chief Priests plot against Jesus? Martha asked Jesus, “Lord, if you had only been here, my brother would not have died?” Magdalene asked, “How could they have taken my Lord away?” Peter and the boys club surely asked, “Magdalene, how can you say Christ is risen?” How can it be that Christ arose, appeared and then ordained Magdalene, Joanna and Mary before Peter,

James and John? How can it be that any Christian excludes women pastors in defiance of Christ's example? How can it be that Saul of Tarsus, who came to Damascus to arrest Christians, is now preaching of God's inclusive love?

"How can it be?" is a universal question asked by all who long for a better world. Jesus asked Judas, "How can it be that you betray me with a kiss?" 'Saul, Saul, how can you persecute me?' "How is that any of you worry over theological slogans while your hearts hatch harmful schemes? Oh Jerusalem, oh Rome, oh Saint Louis, oh Nashville, how can you keep killing the prophets? How is it that you are so slow to believe the prophets?"

Mary asks, "How can this be?" As a teen likely less than sixteen years old, Mary is wise to be cautious. Who would not be troubled by Gabriel's invitation? Despite the angel cooing, "Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God..." Mary asks, "How can this be?" Mary knows pregnancy outside of marriage holds great risk and danger. The best outcome she could expect might be, "And Joseph her fiancé, being a righteous man and not wanting to disgrace Mary, planned to send her away secretly" (Matthew 1:19). What does "send her away" imply? Where would Joseph send his pregnant bride? Without a husband, a woman could not own property and many were reduced to panhandling or prostitution. We might gloss over this religious culture, but if we fail to name this evil, oppression and injustice, then we miss Mary's bravery and God's calling to break excluding yokes today.

With questions and fears Mary says, "Yes!" Richard Rohr says, "Mary's 'yes' seemed to be essential to the event of incarnation. God does not come uninvited. God's grace cannot enter without an opening from our side, or we would be robots. God does not want robots, but lovers who return love for love." (The Universal Christ)

As Heather, Gayle, Darren, Kate and I prayerfully brainstormed our Advent series, Kate sent me a powerful sermon. I wanted to include a quote from it, but since the writer is here, let's hear from Pastor Kate Fields about Mary's powerful "Yes".

Mary- This teenager who was impoverished, unwed, pregnant, and a Jew who was living in occupied Roman territory actually said "YES". "Yes, I will do this very big, very scary thing." She said yes to a pregnancy of ridicule because of her unwed status; she said yes to nearly losing her fiancé Joseph; she said yes to giving birth not in a home, but in a stable with curious horses gazing overhead as she lay in straw...

She said yes to giving birth under a tyrant king named Herod who had begun an infanticide in the land as he was determined to kill any young boy who could possibly usurp him; she said yes to raising this kid that spent as much time as he could studying the powerful teachings of Judaism in the synagogue; she said yes to being the mother whose son was destined to die.

This woman said yes to all of this... And all folks can talk about is her purity.

Naw, y'all.... I'm done talking about her purity. This woman is an astounding mother of our faith. She said yes to things she couldn't even see yet because she knew this boy who would grow inside her was coming to change things. Maybe even some of the things — like patriarchy— that reduced her to just being a virgin, rather than a full embodied woman with agency and dignity and pain.

Mary didn't just say, "Yeah, okay, do your thing God, I'll do whatever"— instead, her YES comes in the way of a song. It has become one of the most famous texts from the New Testament, and we call it the Magnificat. The term "Magnificat" is a Latin term, meaning, "I praise God for...." This is what she sings:

"My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for God has looked with favor on the lowliness of God's servant.

Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is God's name.
God's mercy is for those who fear God from generation to generation.

God has shown strength with God's arm;

God has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

God has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly;

God has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.

God has helped God's servant Israel,

in remembrance of God's mercy, according to the promise God made to our
ancestors,

to Abraham and to his descendants forever." (Luke 1:46-55)

What a way to say YES! What a way to prepare the way for Jesus to come. She preached! Yes, she did! Her "Yes" response involved a commentary on economics — with both a focus on how wealth is used and how a consequence of that can be an inadequate access to basic needs like food. Her song focused on the role of hospitality in manifesting the kin-dom of God, and on social inclusion and the breakdown of class-based divisions. This song does not bode well for the powerful who hoard power.

Richard Rohr calls the Magnificat "the most concise statement of the gospel that we have." The Magnificat is so threatening a song that in Argentina, the Magnificat's public recitation was declared illegal for 3-4 years because the leaders there recognized its political implications.

So this, y'all, this Magnificat was Mary's response— her permission and her praise— to God's invitation by way of the angel Gabriel. No wonder Jesus had the sass and strength that he did — he got it from his mother! Mary had an incredible invitation to parent Jesus, yes. But I don't think she was any different than you or I. And, it certainly wasn't her sexual status that entitled her to be the bearer of the Son of God. It was her heart and her faithfulness. Her boldness and her courage! There is no difference in Mary and you." (Kate Fields)

Mary has power beyond folding her hands in prayer like those lovely icons. She is a prophet. Indeed, Jesus is raised by a preacher: his mother. The courage, goodness and power within Mary is given to all of us. The incarnation tells us God's power is "with us". Mary's Magnificat, Jesus in the manger, Joseph dreaming, Magi coming traversing, Jesus teaching, Christ healing, the cross

embracing humanity's worst, Christ rising, Christ and promising to be with us to the end of the age, Pentecost happening. These events proclaim God's power present with us. And if God is with us- well friends, that makes us pretty good. If God's spirit of love and power is not within us, then we only have some old rules. But God's power is at work in us with a love that pairs earth with heaven. Luke uses the word power 37 times:

From birth John will be equipped with the spirit and power of Elijah.

The Holy Spirit will come over you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you.

All who heard about John's birth considered it carefully: "What will this child be for... Indeed, the Lord's power is with them."

Jesus returned from the wilderness in the power of the Spirit.

Shaken, the crowds wondered: "What kind of Word is this: with authority and power?"

Now the power of the Lord was with Jesus to heal.

The crowd wanted to touch Jesus, for power was going out from him and healing everyone.

Jesus called the disciples together and gave them power and authority to heal and bring hope.

Jesus said, "Look, I have given you authority and power over adversaries."

"I confer on you God's royal power given to me."

"Look, stay in the city until you have been furnished with heavenly power."

"You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you... and you will be Christ's witnesses to the end of the earth" (Acts 1)

We might sum it up with Acts 11: "The Lord's power was with them!"

That baby lying in the manger proclaims that God's power is with us. It is not that God came to us once upon a time, but that God is with us right now and forever! God with us with Mary's courage. God with us in Joseph's dream. God with us in the other road taken by the Magi. God with us in the shepherds' singing. Christ is with us wherever there is healing, feeding, welcoming, comforting and listening. Christ with us as Mary Magdalene preached Christ is risen. God with us as we break the bread. Christ with us in the baptism of the Ethiopian eunuch and all who once seemed strangers. Christ with us in that Acts 4 food bank and every cup of soup ever served. Christ with us making no distinction between the uncircumcised and the once called chosen ones. Christ with us confronting Paul's deep trusting in the law, instead of the Spirit. The Apostle Paul said "Christ in us" over 100 times! Christ in us- as we ordained women 1956 years after Jesus did. Christ in us as Martin Luther King called us to let justice flow down like the mighty waters! Christ in us with every oppressive yoke we break. So let us stay stuck with the very good question, "How can this be?" No, let us hear Christ inviting, wooing, and cajoling us with love and answer "Yes" to God's invitation. With Mary, Moses and Martin, let us say, "Yes, Lord. Yes, Emmanuel, with your power; let's see what we build on earth as in heaven." Amen.