

## Saying yes

*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, "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.*

*Luke 1:26-38*

The Annunciation has been a popular subject of art for centuries. And I have my favorites, many of them from artists of the Renaissance, like Botticelli and Leonardo and Fra Angelico. But more and more I have come to appreciate paintings that place this scene in a contemporary, real-life setting. In some of them it is not even clear that this is a biblical story. There are no gossamer wings and halos and gothic chambers. What they show instead is an encounter with a stranger that brings an announcement of some kind, a word from another reality that has the potential to change the life of the one receiving it.

These contemporary works suggest that annunciations happen not just in some mythical time and place, but in the real world, in real time and in a recognizable place, among the familiar items of everyday life. They suggest that annunciations still happen, that God still breaks into our everyday world and ordinary lives.

I believe that annunciations do still happen, in ways that are less obvious and more subtle than an angel appearing out of the blue. But there is another side of this story. As much as it is the story of the announcement that the angel Gabriel brings to Mary, it is also the story of Mary's response to that announcement. This is a story about saying yes.

Mary shows the signs of reluctance, fear, and hesitation that any one of us would have felt in the same circumstance. She asks, "How can this be?" And for all the reassurance that there is nothing to fear, it is not clear that Gabriel sufficiently answers her question. But in spite of all the doubt and fear, anxiety and hesitation, in the end Mary still says yes. "Here I am, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."

Among other things, Mary is saying yes to giving up the management of her future. She surrenders control of her own story in order to throw herself into a larger story, a larger purpose, the outcome of which she cannot see.

I have been dwelling on a quote from Ann Patchett, which I will return to in my final Pulse article this week. She says, “There are a few times in life when you leap up and the past that you’d been standing on falls away behind you, and the future that you mean to land on is not yet in place, and for a moment you’re suspended, knowing nothing and no one, not even yourself.” This is very much like the suspended situation that Mary finds herself in. And when Mary says yes, it’s not because she fully understands what she is getting herself into, and not because she has calculated how she might benefit from this offer. She says yes out of trust that with God all things are possible. She says yes out of trust that the past life that she has been standing on and which is falling away will be honored. And most of all she says yes out of trust that a future that she cannot know yet will be there when she lands, and that someone will be there to hold her steady when she lands on it. More than anything else, she trusts that God has a way of making things work out even when we can’t see how, or where it will lead us.

So, I want to suggest this morning that not only do annunciations still happen, and happen to all of us—we are also still called to say yes. We are called to bear Christ into the world, even when we don’t fully understand just what that means. We are called to say yes not because we have things all worked out, but because we trust in the larger purpose that God wants to accomplish in the world through ordinary people like you and me, with all our doubts and fears and hesitations.

I cannot tell you what saying yes might mean for each one of you. Only you will know what that looks like for yourself. But let me remind you of one of the saints of our congregation who died three years ago—Lois McIntyre. Many of you who remember her will know that there is hardly any service organization or helping opportunity in Mason City that doesn’t have Lois’s fingerprints on it. She was instrumental in starting and organizing and supporting such agencies as Hawkeye Harvest Food Bank, and Charlie Brown Day Care Center, which not only provides child care for working parents, but gives children a good start in their development. She helped start the organization that has evolved from Handicap Village to One Vision. She had her hand in other projects that are still being carried out by agencies like Community Action. And the reason I recall her to our memory, is that whenever an opportunity arose to serve or help others, it seems Lois said yes without hesitation. And even if that opportunity did not present itself to her, she said yes anyway and got others to say yes as well.

Not all of us are called or even capable of being the dynamo that Lois McIntyre was, and again, I cannot say just what it will look like for you to say yes. But whenever the opportunity arises to bear Christ into the world—

by saying yes to giving yourself to the people around you  
and to strangers you’ve never met;

by saying yes to a new adventure, to a new level of service or sacrifice;

by saying yes to a change of lifestyle

or accepting a challenge that you have been putting off;

by saying yes to whatever lifts people out of despair and into hope;

by saying yes to giving and receiving love—

however, wherever, whenever you are asked to say yes, you do not need to be afraid. And for that, we have Mary as our model and guide.

Like Mary, we are being asked—even today—we are being asked to say yes to something we may not fully understand, something that might be a bit scary, and to an outcome we may not be able to control or manage. Like Mary, we are being asked to bear Christ into the world.

So, what do you need to say yes to?

I would like to offer a challenge for this coming year.

First of all, if you are not yet sure of something you need to say yes to, I challenge you to spend some time discerning just what that might be for you.

And then, if you discover it, or if you already know, and particularly, if you have known for a long time—I challenge you to find the courage and trust to say yes.

And finally, let me encourage you, especially in this coming couple of years, if you are asked to do something in the church, if you are asked to take on a leadership role, if you are able to do whatever you are asked to do—say yes. And maybe even take a cue from Lois McIntyre, so that even if you are not asked outright, say yes anyway.

A frightened young woman from a small village in a backwater province of Judea said yes to a mysterious messenger from God. And through this affirmation, and on this fragile basis, Christ was borne into the world to let us know that we have all found favor with God, that God says yes to everyone. Now we are called not only to say yes, to trust in a future we cannot know, but to carry that yes, that affirmation of God's love, to everyone we meet.

May it be so.

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