

*A sermon preached by Dean Francis
December 24, 2017*

We Protestants don't always know what to do with Mary. Maybe it is all those Christmas pageants where Mary's acceptance seems easy, part of the script – enter stage right, encounter the angel Gabriel, say “yes” or as Luke puts it, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” The angel leaves and we get on with the rest of Jesus' birth story.

It seems like pretty straightforward stuff, but those of you who have given birth or welcomed a child into your family know that this “yes” can be just as terrifying as it is exciting. You know that this “yes” raises as many questions as it answers.

Part of the problem is that we've buried Mary under so many layers of theology, piety, and politics, she's nearly impossible to excavate. Some Christians pray to her, others ignore her. Some call her a victim of divine coercion, others, the Mother of God. For still others, she is child prophet — a young girl who fearlessly birthed the arrival of God's realm to earth.

Mary Lowry's song, “Mary Did You Know,” echoes some of those questions that we have of her. *Mary, did you know that your Baby Boy would one day walk on water? Mary, did you know that your Baby Boy would save our sons and daughters? Did you know that your Baby Boy has come to make you new? This Child that you delivered will soon deliver you.* But then there is this practical set of questions we have. When did you tell your parents you were pregnant? Did you tell Joseph yourself, or did the gossipmongers of Nazareth take care of that for you? Did anyone in the village believe your story? After Gabriel departed, did you doubt his visitation? Question your sanity? Fear for your life?

A good part of what's maddening about this story is its brevity. We know that Mary was “much perplexed” by Gabriel's words, and that she “pondered” his greeting. We know from her question (“How can this be, since I am a virgin?”) that she recognized the bizarre nature of the angel's announcement. And we know from her last words to the angel that she submitted to something that she certainly couldn't completely understand.

But the Gospel narrative leaves out more than it explains. I can think of at least three gaps within the story.

The first is her title as “favored one” and the task she accepts. Tradition tells us that Mary was probably thirteen or fourteen years old when the angel appeared to her. We know that in first-century Jewish culture, a girl who became pregnant out of wedlock faced grave danger. At

the very least, she became an object of widespread scorn. At the worst, she risked being stoned to death by the very villagers who raised her. To say “yes” in this instance was to give herself over to scandal and ostracism. It was to put everything — her reputation, her marriage, her very life — on the line.

So, Mary's favored status led her straight from scandal to danger to the trauma of her son's crucifixion. Even amid new life, there is a threat of death hanging over the story. God's call required her to be profoundly countercultural, to trust an inner vision that flew in the face of everything her community expected of her. As the years passed, and her son's enemies multiplied, Mary's “yes” demanded a degree of courage that makes us tremble, as in the words of the crucifixion hymn. Let's not deceive ourselves: it is no benign thing to be favored of God.

Another gap in the story lies between Mary's question, “*How can this be?*” and her consent, “*Let it be with me according to your word.*”

One of my favorite artistic expressions of the angel's interaction with Mary is a painting by Dante Gabriel Rossetti. It shows Mary seated on a bed, cowering and leaning away from the angel. When the painting was publicly displayed in 1850, it was roundly criticized because Mary didn't appear all that eager to hear from the angel.

But this is the way I envision Mary's journey from questioning to acceptance. Not an instant “yes” but instead a tortured and agonized acquiescence. This way she seems more accessible to me, more able to translate the story into my own realm of experience.

The third gap ends this week's reading: “Then the angel departed from her.” This is a gap in my life with God that I both recognize and dread. It's the moment when the prayer ends, the vision recedes, the certainty wavers. It's the moment after the “yes,” the moment when the mountaintop experience fades into memory, and life in the valley begins.

How different Mary's experience might have been if Gabriel had stuck around to erase her doubts and silence her critics. But he departed, leaving the ongoing work of discernment and discipleship to Mary alone. Her “yes” didn't signal the end of mystery. Mystery had only begun.

We have no way of knowing what Mary knew. My guess is that like us, she knew just enough to get started. My guess is that the work of bearing God into the world involved ceaseless discovery and ongoing consent, just as it does today. My guess is that each trembling “yes” Mary whispered into God's heart, changed the world. As does ours.

In this sense, the story shows the way of a life in faith. Mary is favored or chosen,

perplexed or questioning, and it is only through this long and sometimes torturous birthing process that God can be borne in our tentative and sometimes fearful yes. Only then can we assume the voice of prophets of old and say, “Here am I, send me.” So much of how we experience life is connected to this pattern. This is true not only for the specific, localized, and concrete events in our life. It is also true for the arc of our life of faith. The pattern set by Mary and her predecessors provides the template for action in and understanding of specific moments in our life but also establishes an outline for us to envision the entirety of our relationship with God.

Mary’s story closes out the Advent season and it points toward a way of life that seems to resonate with the meaning of incarnation. Her evolution from being chosen, to being perplexed, to being fearful, to being committed sums up the best of what it means to be human, what it means to reflect the divine.

In her Advent reflections Jan Richardson wrote,

I have been struck by how much the Christmas story hinges on hope.

The hope that propels an angel to visit a young woman and offer her an outlandish invitation.

The hope that enables Mary to respond to the angel with an audacious *yes*.

The hope that inspires her to sing of the restoration of the world as if it has already happened.

The hope that comes to us as legacy, as gift, as blessing, as invitation.

The hope that lives in Gabriel, in Mary, and in every person we meet in the scriptures of this season: this hope is not about wishful thinking for a good result in a future time far removed from our present circumstances. Instead, hope is what comes to meet us here and now, in even the most painful present. Hope makes it possible for us to see the presence of God when it seems most difficult, to say *yes* to God when it seems most impossible, to sing when it seems most absurd, to dream of—and work for—a world restored when it seems most hopeless.”¹

¹ Jan Richardson, “Advent 4 – Mary and Gabriel,” Through The Advent Door, 2014