

Today may be one of the most confusing days on our church calendar. It's December 24th and technically Christmas Eve, but according to the church calendar, it's not yet Christmas Eve. We get to put the brakes on and slow it down a little this morning, because this morning is the 4th Sunday of Advent. This morning we are still waiting and anticipating. We have yet to make our trip to the delivery room, a stable in Bethlehem. This morning we are still waiting and longing for that baby to make its appearance to the world. This morning we are focusing on the Mother to be. We're so close to delivery time, but not there just yet. This morning we are focusing on Mary.

Mary was a young girl. Thirteen, maybe fourteen years of age. She was poor. She was nothing special. She was betrothed to a man much older. We don't know much else about Mary. Coming from a Jewish family, we know that Mary probably knows and respects the biblical laws of her people. I can imagine she is frightened. What young woman wouldn't be frightened to know they are being promised into marriage to an older man. I would imagine most child brides are filled with anxiety and doubt going into the marriage. And I imagine that Mary was probably protected by her family. They don't want any other men coming around and taking advantage of her. To have someone use her body would bring shame on the whole family.

Now, here is Mary with a celestial being standing before her, asking her to do something that could cost her everything. To become pregnant out of wedlock and to become pregnant with a child who does not belong to the betrothed is unheard of. This could cost her her life. She and this baby could end up alone and without the resources they need to survive. She doesn't know what Joseph's reaction will be. Mary doesn't just naively answer, it says she ponders. She asks questions. The wheels in Mary's brain are turning and she is listening intently to what Gabriel says. When Gabriel tells her that her cousin, Elizabeth, in her old age, has conceived a son, the story sounds reminiscent to Sarah and Hannah, stories Mary has mostly likely heard and Mary is reminded that nothing, absolutely nothing, is impossible with God.

Mary also knows the dangers of childbirth. Mary probably knows or has heard of women who died in childbirth. Mary knows none of this will be easy. She knows the struggles she is up against. There will be no hospitals, no Intensive Neonatal Care Units. No drugs to help with the pain. But she hears that God is with her and is reminded that nothing is impossible and gives her consent to be the womb for God's son. She says, "let it be..."

We refer to Mary being, "meek and mild." We paint her to be this extremely passive, submissive, young woman, but I think nothing could be further from the truth. I think of Mary as a warrior and a rebel of sorts. After all, Mary goes to Elizabeth and when she arrives she sings a song of how God is going to do a new thing. It is a song of revolution and how the child in her womb will take down the establishment and help create a new order, a new way of being and doing. Mary may not know all the details of what will happen over the course of Jesus' life, but she knows he is going to shake up the world and change things. And she feels blessed to know she is the one who has the honor of bringing this child into the world.

No, I don't think of Mary as meek in the sense of weak. The biblical Greek for Meek is PRAUS, which means dealing with people or situations with consideration and thoughtful manner. It does not indicate weakness, rather it indicates the opposite, one who thinks things over and who deals with things in a humble manner and that takes more strength than one who boasts and brags and doesn't think about their actions and words. And the Hebrew word for meek is ANAW, which has more to do with the circumstances one is willing to endure. There is nothing weak about either of these definitions. And there is nothing weak about this young woman who said yes to God's call. Mary puts her own desires, hopes, dreams, all on the line for the greater good. Mary says yes to God so that God can intervene in a messy world and shake up the establishment. Mary is bold and strong and resilient. And yes, Mary is unexpected. People thought the Messiah would be this larger than life king who came in riding chariots and not a baby who would be born to a poor teenage girl.

But this is what God does, time and time again. God does the unexpected. God works in ways that sometimes leave us scratching our heads.

We are called to serve God in ways that sometimes make us uncomfortable. We can expect God to call us to serve places and people that we don't understand or maybe where we don't always feel safe. We want to say, "NO," but we are reminded that we must have faith that God is with us. Just as Gabriel tells Mary that God is with her. This is how God works. And if a young teenage girl from Nazareth can ponder these things and answer, "Here am I a servant of the Lord, let it be..." then how can we say no? How can we ignore God's call to serve all people? To love all people? To share hope and light and love and grace with everyone? Not just some, but all people? How, when God calls us to make change in the world, can we say no?

We may not feel that we are up to the task of answering God's call, but we can always expect the unexpected with God. God can use our heartbreak, our downfalls, our joys and our wisdom to help and strengthen others. God wants us to use our stories, the good, the bad and the ugly, and say yes to serving God through serving others. Let us fulfill God's calling by saying, "Let it be..." "Here Am I, a servant of the lord." "Yes."

In a few hours we will meet back here at the church, and the unexpected will continue to happen. In a few hours a young woman and her betrothed will find themselves in Bethlehem. In a few hours, in a dark and smelly stable where the animals sleep. The labor pains will have started. The fear that comes with labor will take place. Will the baby be ok? Will the mother be ok? Will either of them survive? The stress and anxiety will be there. Mary and Joseph will find themselves alone, with the exception of the animals, and with one last scream and a push, she will fulfill her duty to become the mother of the Messiah. Again, in an unexpected place and time she and Joseph will raise this child and the world will never be the same. In the most unexpected ways, God does exactly what we expect God to do, to love humanity enough, that God becomes human.

In a few hours we will rejoice that Christ has been born, until then, we wait and watch in awe at the strength and determination of a young woman from Nazareth.

May we be half as strong as that young woman and say yes each time God calls on us. Amen.