



THE IMPLICATIONS OF CHRISTMAS FOR MARY

December 15, 2019, Third Sunday of Advent

Luke 1:26-38

Kimberly L. Clayton, The Brick Presbyterian Church in the City of New York

The first chapter of Luke tells of Jesus' birth through Mary's experience. Matthew 1 tells that same story through Joseph's. Today and next week we will consider the implications of Christmas for Mary and then for Joseph. Both Sundays, of course, invite us to consider the implications of Christmas for our own lives, too.

That is where I'd like to begin this morning. With our own lives and specifically our life together in this transitional time. In December two years ago, you were going through Advent and Christmas under the capable leadership of Doug King, following Michael Lindvall's retirement. Meanwhile in Atlanta, I was going through Advent with the busy-ness of a semester's end at Columbia Theological Seminary, where I had been working happily for 13 years. You and I did not know each other at all. In September, on an ordinary day, an email floated onto my computer screen. The address: Brickchurch.org; the subject line: Transitional Minister inquiry. Your Transitional Search Committee had received my name from a few people...would I be interested in sending in my Personal Information Form to be considered for this interim role? Wow...give up my permanent job to take on a transitional one? And did they really mean me or had they contacted the wrong Kim?

But, within a few weeks, I sent them "my stuff," not expecting to hear from them again. Then Peter Manning's voice was on the phone for an initial 'get to know you' conversation. Afterward, time passed without word. Life continued as usual. Then the committee called again, this time to arrange a Skype interview in November. Then another long silence. December came and went; 2017 turned over to 2018...I suspected I hadn't passed Bill Ryckman's muster! In the second week



of January, attending a conference in Princeton, my cell phone rang. It was a Tuesday. The committee asked me to change my travel plans, come to New York Friday to interview; and by the way, could I preach a sermon for them Saturday morning? Not having a spare sermon in my back pocket, I skipped the conference all day Wednesday and instead wrote a sermon in the seminary's computer lab. 'Who *are* these people?' I wondered.

Probably to our mutual surprise, we 'clicked.' The next week they offered me the job with these immortal words: "We love you—will you come? Everything is fine at Brick, we just need you for 18 months, maybe 2 years at the most, while we look for our next Senior Pastor." I was here by the first week of March.

Now back to Mary. A common name in her time and ours. She was an ordinary person living an ordinary life. Just listen to how ordinary it all was...ordinary, that is, if you leave out the part about an angel named Gabriel with a message from God:

In Galilee, in a town called Nazareth, lived a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph. The virgin's name was Mary...such an ordinary name. Mary, who got her drinking water from the same well as everyone else in Nazareth. Mary, engaged to a man, like so many young women her age. Mary, in her house one day doing...what? Something ordinary, no doubt...cooking or weaving, sweeping or maybe daydreaming about her wedding.

And it might have gone on like that for her. Thirty-three ordinary years, or more perhaps: Cooking. Weaving. Sweeping. Married to Joseph. Having children and teaching them as they grew. Going to that well in Nazareth not just for the water but for the sociability of it, too. Women laughing, talking about the ordinary stuff of their days there in Nazareth in Galilee. Yes, it might have gone on like that for Mary, except for the part of the story that cannot possibly be left out:

The angel Gabriel was sent by God to Galilee and then to Nazareth and then to the very house where Mary was having an ordinary day. It seems to me that finding an



angel in your doorway could be troubling enough. But Mary seemed to be more troubled and perplexed by the message he delivered: “Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you!”

Now *that* was troubling. Don’t get me wrong—I think we all hope the Lord is with us. With us, that is, in some benign, innocuous kind of way. We want the Lord to be with us when we want the Lord to be with us. And the rest of the time we kind of hope the Lord is with us, but not necessarily paying close attention.

It’s about to get a lot more troubling, of course. For Gabriel tells Mary she is going to have a baby who will be not only her son but the Son of God, the long-awaited Messiah, though she can call him Jesus. And then Gabriel takes a big, deep breath (if angels need to take big, deep breaths) and says:

“Hewillbegreat,andwillbecalledtheSonoftheMostHigh,andtheLordGodwillgivehimthethroneofhisancestorDavid.HewillreignoverthehouseofJacobforeverandofhikingdomtherewillbenoend.”

There. It is all so clear. Already accomplished, really. Gabriel, you see, already has one golden-shoed foot in that glorious future—where this Son of God reigns forever and God’s kingdom has no end. As an angel, he knows very well what God can do. But Mary of Nazareth has both bare feet planted firmly on the dirt floor of her here and now. And Luke says she is troubled. She asks how this wild announcement is supposed to unfold so seamlessly. But Gabriel knows any explanation will sound as irrational as the announcement itself, so he uses the same angelic line that worked on Sarah centuries earlier: “Look, Mary, nothing is impossible with God.”

Frederick Buechner once wrote about this moment in Scripture, when Gabriel gave Mary this news and told her not to be afraid, saying: “...[Gabriel] only hoped she wouldn’t notice that beneath the great, golden wings he himself was trembling with fear to think that the whole future of creation now hung on [her] answer...”ⁱ



Now back to us for a moment...though we must be careful here. We are not Mary and this time in Brick Church's life and history is certainly nowhere near as momentous as this moment in biblical history, for heaven's sake. But I do want to make a connection on an infinitesimal scale. You are in a transitional time of waiting for your new Minister. You know that God has led you over the past 252 years, faithfully calling minister after minister to serve this church. The promise is that God is doing that again right now as the Pastor Nominating Committee continues their work, narrowing their search. It's just that Deane Turner has not yet written the account of your future, only your past. So in your own little way, you also want to know how this plan will unfold. So maybe Gabriel has stopped at our doorway today to remind us, too: "Look, nothing is impossible with God, Brick. God has your future all worked out, so don't be afraid, okay?" And Gabriel pauses to see how we will respond.

I always imagine that Mary took a long moment, a 'pregnant pause,' if you will before she responded. But when she did, she said, "Yes." "Yes, here I am. Let it be with me according to your word."

Mary said...yes. Yes to God's future, which meant her own future was to be utterly changed. Gone will be a quiet marriage to Joseph. No wondering if the baby will be a boy or a girl and what he might want to be when he grows up. That's all been settled. No obscure, secure life in Nazareth. No fitting in with all the other moms at the well. And if he is to sit on the throne of David, then he will have to unseat Rome and that means trouble, danger, even violence lies ahead. Maybe all of that races through Mary's mind in the long pause, but still she says, "Yes, I will trust God's future."

Yes to the God who is able to scatter the proud and lift up the lowly. Yes to the God who fills the hungry with good things and helps the rich understand their own emptiness. Mary could not know everything that would happen. But she knew enough about God to know that ordinary can suddenly become extraordinary; and what is predictable can be changed into an unanticipated providence; and that



while the path ahead is not always clear, it is always clear who is on the path ahead with us. God is always sending out invitations to say “Yes” to the future unafraid.

I’ve been reading and praying and wrestling with this story in the same week I had to make an important decision about my future. Because it has become the worst-kept secret of the last 4 days, I have been asked to share this news today. This fall, a church contacted me about the possibility of serving them next in a transitional role. As with Brick Church, I was one of several candidates...there was no guarantee from them or from me and these things can take awhile. Still, I kept in view that in March, I will have been with you for two years and Brick’s transitional time will be drawing to a close in the months to come. Two weeks ago, the invitation came to a future I had not necessarily been looking for but was now on my doorstep. After more of a pause than Gabriel would have put up with, I said, “Yes” though I was a bit afraid to do so. I was reluctant to leave what I have come to know and love here—the now-ordinary ways we know each other and work together day to day. Though I have moved from my initial question about you: “Who *are* these people?!” to my affirmation of you: “I love these people!” I have now said “Yes” to them.

When I said “Yes” to you, we did not know the hard work that was ahead in this transitional time, but we did it. We did it because you were not afraid, but are instead a courageous congregation. The work was possible because you trust God absolutely with your future. Because you are determined to welcome your new Senior Pastor with a healthy and strong church with a dedicated staff, excellent lay leadership, creative education, transformative mission, joyful fellowship, and yes, a responsible budget and endowment practices. I’m not leaving quickly. I will be here through February so we have time to plan carefully to keep everything going smoothly. Your most important responsibility is to continue to support the church in every way, to pray for the PNC as they move closer and closer to the person God is calling as your next pastor, and to help us meet our stewardship goal.

Biblical scholar Raymond Brown once wrote that Luke presents Mary as the first and model disciple. She is the first to hear the good news of Jesus Christ, accept it



and respond to it.ⁱⁱ She is indeed the model of all the lesser “Yeses” every disciple has uttered ever since.

Mostly, we respond to God’s invitations to us without the benefit of an angel in the doorway. Sometimes we say no in a bid for sanity and continuity. Sometimes we say yes, though there is a certain amount of risk and fear in the unknown. Often, with God, what seems settled gets upset, but only for a time. Because God’s plan always unfolds. And God’s plan is moving us and all of heaven and earth toward good news.

The implications of Christmas for Mary mean that things are not going according to plan. At least not the one she had in mind. The future will be different than she thought it might be. Now at Christmas the implications for us are changing, too. I am sorting through my feelings about that and I know you will be, too.

I recently came across this quote from Dag Hammarskjold who said, “For all that has been—thanks. For all that shall be—yes.” That’s what Mary said...she said, “Yes.” Because nothing will be impossible with God. Our reading today ended with these words: “Then the angel departed from her.” But that is not actually how the story ends. Within her and also as though filling the whole house, Mary felt God-with-her. “Emmanuel,” she said aloud. It’s what we say aloud, too, “Emmanuel,” which means, “God is with us.”

Amen.

ⁱ Frederick Buechner, **Peculiar Treasures: A Biblical Who’s Who** (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1979), 39.

ⁱⁱ Raymond E. Brown, **A Coming Christ in Advent** (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1988), 60.