

A sermon by Dale Rosenberger, Minister
First Congregational Church, UCC, Darien, Connecticut

“Greetings, favored one! God is with you! Do not be afraid, Mary, for you will conceive in your womb and bear a son and will name him Jesus.” Today we launch Advent with the story of the Annunciation. Here Gabriel tells Mary that she is in a family way even though she and Joseph are still dating. With this shocking story Luke transforms gynecology into theology and obstetrics into revelation. This is no curse, but a blessing with endless benefits. But Mary pondered how this could possibly figure as good news in her life or anyone’s. She knows she is in trouble.

From Gabriel’s greeting, we realize that Christmas is really a God-intended future descending on humankind, apart from our plans. Maybe it figures as good news in some grand heavenly scheme, but right then we might use less polite phrases for this gift of future hope not of our choosing. Do you think Mary felt picked on?

God shapes our destiny putting a baby in the womb of a quiet girl from a nobody family. So as we begin Advent, we consider life’s intrusions, its interruptions, its sudden fluctuations, its surprising disturbances. Abstractly, we might know such unsettling moments can be openings through which new and creative things can occur. But that doesn’t stop our heart from sinking in the moment. Transformation so big and sweeping as a baby is never easy. It brings sacrifice with each new joyous foothold for good. How much more in the case of this baby for all of us!

These are the days when we arrange our crèche scenes on side tables. The characters evoke the different parts of the story that our children will re-narrate with their pageant here on December 17th. Herod and the Magi. Joseph and the innkeeper. The shepherds and the angelic choir. This layered, still unfinished story is all set into motion as Gabriel addresses a surprised and befuddled Mary.

Do you ever feel as though Christmas has a life of its own and drags us along with it, willingly or not? It’s a month-long glacier sliding down from the north, grinding across the landscape before receding to leave us as exposed as we felt before. Christmas in all of its manifestations has a life and momentum all its own. Think of the smiling lit reindeer waving on lawns, scheming jewelry ads, and Burl Ives’ “Holly Jolly Christmas”. Ah, we say, it all begins again. But is this a good thing? Maybe our pulse nostalgically warms as it starts. Or maybe we sigh with unease. If we feel at all ambivalent, that can give us a tiny taste of how Mary felt.

As the world saw Mary, she deserved no special mention or attention. She was unremarkable, without exceptional merit. She displays no remarkable abilities or promise. She clearly asks for no favors. Nowhere are we led to believe that Mary was anyone other than a simple Jewish girl going about what adolescent girls do—doing her chores, staying out of trouble, managing her worry and fear, fretting about her eventual place in the world, dreaming, struggling, hoping, and moping.

But as Gabriel brings tidings from heaven's family planning department, he leads off saying, "Hail, O favored one, the Lord is with you!" Say what you want about Mary, world. Sophisticated and worldly-wise? No. But she knew enough to be suspicious of this smooth-talking messenger sporting such a flowery salutation.

After all, the biblical history is clear. Divine promises always cut simultaneously in every direction. Who knew what she was getting into? The unexpected and unknown bring disturbing upheaval. Whether Mary's era or ours, what mother-to-be has ever greeted pregnancy without both joy and fear at where it might all lead? And that anxiety doesn't end with delivery. Instead our fears only morph into new concerns. Truly, I should have Gary and Erica preach this sermon instead of me.

But the truth is our anxiety at receiving the awesome gift of a new life is lifelong for us parents. We never stop or get over being parents. Simeon told Mary eight days after Jesus' birth, "a sword will pierce through your own soul." Every parent here could say that at one time or another about your child. "A sword has pierced my soul." Nothing in my life has made me more vulnerable than being a father.

Mary responds to Gabriel's high talk, saying, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." I can't recall more remarkable words in the Bible. Unflappable composure. Unshakeable trust. Unflinching devotion to her inscrutable God. Mary is of an age when most of us worry about test scores or going to the prom. If we all hate it as the future intrudes upon us in ways we can't control, those who must hate this most must be adolescents. They hate it most because so much of their lives is out of their control: changes in their bodies, changes in their identity and beliefs, changes in relationships with everyone.

Of course, Gabriel doesn't give Mary a choice here. He just declares this is how it is going to go. This is an Annunciation not a support group. "Great things are going to happen!" Gabriel tells Mary. And she wonders. "Yes, but great *for whom?*" Still, her response is, "let it be unto me according to your word." This isn't docility or passivity, as the church wrongly interpreted, miscasting women for centuries.

For in the next scene Mary sings to Elizabeth her graciously militant Magnificat, "My soul magnifies the Lord...For he has put down the mighty from their thrones and lifted the lowly, scattering the proud in the thoughts of their hearts." Mary is not a timid, retiring sweet young thing. The seed of the Holy Spirit is barely in her and she is already parsing the implications of God's new power shift in the world. After a rough start, Mary's response to Gabriel's news becomes full-throated joy.

She is ardently obedient. Luke sees Mary as the first and an idealized disciple. In her unconditional yes to this annunciation as God's course for her future life, she shows us how to get caught up in God's intentions. Her eager, exuberant yes to do her part in God's budding plan to liberate this world, languishing in bondage, sounds more amazing as it resonates within today's mouthy and narcissistic age.

So what's God up to in commandeering this innocent, unsuspecting young girl? Think about it this way reflecting on your experience over the course of a lifetime. Do you ever have moments--say, as the strong stomp down the weak, or as truly good people get undercut as the evil are preening their power--when you say to yourself, "Why doesn't God do something? When will God take decisive action?"

In 1992, as our family drove from Columbus, Ohio to the Craigville Colloquy on Cape Cod, our station wagon negotiated the South Bronx. The borough was a bigger mess back then, with stripped and smoldering car frames at the roadside. My seven year old saw it and muttered under her breath, "Why, I'd pay someone five dollars to clean all of this up." It is the same impulse: *why doesn't someone do something!* Isaiah prophesied from the same place. The people of Israel are in exile, far from home, among the godless. Who will do something about it? They wax nostalgic for the good old days when Yahweh stuck it to Pharaoh, "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence." We all yearn for God to act decisively in the world.

Guess what friends? As Gabriel addresses Mary, our prayers are answered. Not answered in the way we would have had God answer them. But answered out of God's genius for bringing good out of evil, light out of darkness, hope out of despair, salvation in the moment when we were concluding that all is forever lost.

In this encounter as Mary says yes, we have the moment when God moves from playing defense to playing offense. No more agreements of 'God will do this and that for us if we'll be obedient at least in the most minimally basic ways', like with Noah and Abraham and King David. After all, we kept blowing those deals and God had to keep starting over with new generations. With Gabriel's new plan and Mary's acquiescence, it's almost like the troops have been landed successfully on Normandy. Once they gained a foothold, it became inevitable that Hitler's dark axis powers would be defeated. So it is now with the coming of Jesus. God has established a beachhead below that will never disappear and shall be vindicated.

In this quiet imperceptible way, God enters our world with all its resources and anguish, all its gifts and groaning. God comes to us as one of us to claim what is after all finally God's for our rescue. Jesus Christ is the supreme act of divine intrusion into a world that thought it had divided all its spoils from looting for itself. In Christ, God refuses to stay in his place. In Christ, what seemed done and over has all begun anew, suffused with hope, soaked in grace, hinting at our salvation. Amen.