

**“Saying Yes in the Face of Fear” Luke 1:26-38 | Rev. Michele Ward  
December 4, 2022 Communion Sunday | Second Sunday of Advent  
Advent Series: “From Generation to Generation”**

**Brown Memorial Park Avenue Presbyterian Church | Baltimore, MD**

Luke 1:26-38 (NRSV)

The Gospel reading today comes from the Gospel of Luke. Listen now for a Word from God.

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.

One: The word of the Lord.

**All: Thanks be to God.**

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**SERMON PRAYER**

Advent God, you meet us in our fear and doubt. You meet us in the messiness of every generation’s victories and failures. You meet us in the holy tension between your command and our response. Meet us here, now, in the interpretation of your Word. Amen.

**SERMON**

We find ourselves in the second week of Advent in our sermon series “From Generation to Generation” with the story of Mary on our lips and in our hearts. Last week, Pastor Andrew set the stage with the genealogy of Jesus in the gospel of Matthew. He reminded us that the family of God is messy, and the church is meant to be a community where we bring our full selves, mess and all. Just like the family tree of Jesus, we as the church are a mixture of all sorts of miracles and mistakes.

Today, we hop to another gospel, the gospel of Luke, where we encounter the mess that started it all - Mary’s unexpected pregnancy, the virgin birth. The angel Gabriel, comes to Mary, we know not where. It could be inside her home, on the street, in the marketplace, at the home of a friend. In this anonymous location, Luke tells us that Mary probes the angel for more information. The angel then continues to explain the surprising situation to Mary. She will become pregnant by the Holy Spirit and conceive a son. His name will be Jesus, and he will be the Messiah. Bonus - her older relative, Elizabeth, has also conceived a son, and she is already six months along in her pregnancy. Nothing is impossible with God, the angel says.

Then, Mary says her famous line: “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” If the immaculate conception wasn’t difficult enough for some of us to believe, now we have something else to add to the list of unbelievable moments - Mary accepts this announcement. Mary initially responds with fear, and does not give in to her fear. Instead, she presents herself as emotionally, physically, mentally, and spiritually available for whatever God may ask of her.

Artistic depictions of the annunciation, or the announcement, of Mary’s pregnancy, may fill our mind’s eye - Mary, long flowing hair, robed in white to signify her purity. Mary, eyes downcast, never looking straight at the angel. Mary, her face full of hope and beauty. Dr. Christine Hong, professor at Columbia Theological Seminary, writes, “Some theologians try to explain away the dissonance between the command to put away fear and what comes later in the story. Yet, what if the dissonance is what we are meant to sit with?”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Dr. Christine Hong, From Generation to Generation Commentary, “Sermon Planning Resource,” A Sanctified Art Advent 2022 Series.

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The dissonance between the interpretation of this text and the concepts of gender and sexuality in this encounter between the angel Gabriel and Mary perplex me. It is this dissonance that Dr. Hong invites us to sit with this morning as we consider what it is like in Mary’s life as well as our own to navigate the command to stop being afraid and the command to accept the fate God has for her. The heart of this dissonance is in the famous line of Mary’s in verse 38: “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.” Our modern ears chafe at the word slave or enslaved person. Yet, the Greek word interpreted as servant here is actually the common word for slave. To say it plainly, Mary is proclaiming: “Here am I, the woman-slave of the Lord.” The difference between a slave and a servant is plain as day. An enslaved person is held against their will, is forced to say yes or face severe consequences such as violence or death. A servant chooses to enter employment, and has the freedom, presumably, to leave and seek employment elsewhere. No one owns them except themselves. They are their own masters.

Records exist of Roman aristocrats commanding enslaved women to bear children for them in the Iron Age, the age in which Mary lived. This kind of transactional sexual encounter, this kind of gender based violence, existed in between the lines of this story, in the background of Mary’s life and the women around her. Womanist biblical scholar, The Rev. Dr. Wilda Gafney: “The language of “servitude” is a misnomer in biblical translation; even though they were not necessarily enslaved in perpetuity, they were enslaved. And while enslaved had no right to protect the integrity of their bodies or control of their sexuality or reproduction.”<sup>2</sup>

When Mary says, “Here am I,” she takes us back to the calls of the prophets in the Old Testament. Leaders like Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Samuel were all called upon by God to speak difficult truth to powerful political and religious leaders, to share the uncomfortable visions. None of them were expecting or preparing for life altering visions, dreams, or prophecies. Like Mary, they were visited by angels, overpowered by them, and asked to do the impossible with God’s help.

The messiness of Mary’s fear and acceptance is in the paradox of her powerlessness and her empowerment. She seems to have no agency whatsoever, and yet, she has enough agency to ask questions of the angel Gabriel, discern what she will do and say, and then commit to this brave act of offering what little consent available to her as an adolescent girl in a patriarchal society. The Rev. Dr. Wilda Gafney continues, “and yet in that moment after being told by someone else what would happen to her body, she became not just the Mother of God, but the holy sister to those of us who do

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<sup>2</sup> The Rev. Dr. Wilda Gafney, “Did Mary Say “Me Too”?”  
<http://www.wilgafney.com/2017/11/26/did-mary-say-me-too/>

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say, “Me too.”<sup>3</sup> Mary takes action and is acted upon. This is the messiness and the paradox of it all. This is the fear and the joy of God becoming flesh, of taking human, or joining us in the glory and the grit of life on earth.

Celebrating Mary’s yes to God invites us to take a closer look at what saying yes to being the Mother of God really meant for her. In the midst of the mess, the text brings us a difficult truth: Arriving at her yes does not come easily, naturally, or without careful consideration.

We are often more comfortable with rejoicing at Mary overcoming her fear than wrestling with what made her so afraid in the first place. We are often more at ease with celebrating wins than discussing how we arrived at them. To speak of the process is to speak of the mess. To speak of the mess is to speak of the human struggle.

Here’s a story for you - in my last sermon I preached about the complexities of the incinerator in South Baltimore and the ways we are all complicit in the burning of city and county trash. I told you stories about the South Baltimore Community Land Trust and the company that contracts with the city to run the incinerator, BRESKO. My neighbors and I in Greenmount West had to wrestle with the mess, quite literally, of working with BRESKO during the pandemic for our neighborhood clean up days. During the pandemic, when recycling and trash pick up went down significantly due to lack of staff and illness due to COVID-19, our community association heard about a program through BRESKO that went around DPW and brought their staff, trucks for bulk trash, and walk on dumpsters. We jumped at the chance to have such service, now knowing that BRESKO would tokenize and use our community as a PR stunt. “Courage rises despite our fear. Those who have suffered loss know this.”<sup>4</sup>

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