

Being re-membered
Matthew 1:18–25; Luke 1:26–38

“Do not be afraid.” This was the message from God’s angels to Mary and Joseph.

“Don’t be afraid.” This is God’s message for us on our Advent journey.

Throughout Scripture, when God’s angels show up with a message for humans, they usually begin with, “Don’t be afraid.... Or, fear not.” Isn’t that something? God knows that human beings are given to fear. We’re afraid of all the things we *should* be afraid of. And we’re also afraid of all kinds of things that we have no reason to fear. So when God has a message for us, God begins by reminding us, “Don’t be afraid.”

(Of course that’s easier said than done.)

In the two birth stories, one story centering Mary and the other Joseph, one written by Matthew and the other by Luke, *both* of them record the angel saying, “Do not be afraid.” How is this message to Mary and Joseph a message for us?

I wonder if at some level we think the announcement of Jesus’ birth to Mary and Joseph was easy for them. We’ve had millennia of hearing these stories and knowing the outcome. We’ve seen countless nativities with serene parents looking with adoration at Baby Jesus. We’ve seen great works of art showing a peaceful Mary focused on Baby Jesus with Joseph looking on in the background. Our children play the roles of Mary and Joseph in Christmas pageants as we watch, delighted by all their cuteness. It all looks so easy. Sweet. Benign. And my guess is that at unconsciously we think, “Of course Mary and Joseph weren’t afraid. Of course they said Yes to God. Who wouldn’t want to give birth to Baby Jesus?”

Because the story is *so very* familiar, we miss *how big* it is!

Another way this story has been made small through the ages is by making it about sex. We’ve been told that the story is miraculous because Mary was a virgin. The story is special because Mary’s pregnancy defied the laws of biology. In this interpretation, sexual purity is

elevated and the body and physical relationships are shunned. This literal interpretation of virginity and purity minimizes and completely misses the significance of this story. And it makes Mary and Joseph insignificant participants in their own lives. And in this history-altering event.

But these stories are big! And Mary and Joseph...they are absolutely significant! They are courageous and strong. The requests made to Joseph and Mary could *not* have been more terrifying. More costly. The implications of God's invitation to them are ones that would change their lives forever. This is not a sweet, benign, happily-ever-after story. And yet...each of them...in turn...said Yes! Incredible.

“Don't be afraid.”

What did Mary have to be afraid of? What did Joseph have to fear? What is it they were saying Yes to? And how does their Yes show us the way through Advent?

When the angel visits Mary, right after the message to “Fear not,” Mary hears, “You have found favor with God.... Or, you have found grace with God.”

This is radical! And revolutionary! For a woman to be visited. For a woman to be the recipient of God's gratuitous favor! To be told that God's grace doesn't need to be earned or mediated. Here is an ordinary young woman. There's nothing particularly special or remarkable about her. She's done nothing to earn this visit from God's angel. She's done nothing to earn this message or to earn God's grace. God's favor is simply given to her. No priest is present to stand between Mary and God. No offering is required. No father or fiancé. No checklist of good deeds. Just Mary and the angel.

This message to Mary is surely a message to us as well. Like Mary, we too are ordinary, nobody special, not particularly remarkable. Yet absolutely special because God's favor is on us. God's grace is for us.

If the message isn't already disorienting and life-altering, the angel continues. "You're going to have a baby. You're going to give birth by the power of the Holy Spirit."

This is the terrifying part. It was surely as terrifying for Mary as it is for us. The invitation for Mary was to trust the life-creating power of the Spirit of God. To accept the invitation she would need to set aside her own agency (what little she had) and to trust the agency of the Holy Spirit. While Mary's world looked very different than our world, there are similarities. Mary's identity was given to her by her parents and their place in society. Whatever power and opportunity she had was given to her by the world around her and the systems that governed that world, and the expectations those systems placed on her as a young woman. The same is true for us. Our identity has also been shaped by the families we were born into, the education and experiences we had, the kind of work we do or don't do. We too are dependent on the world around us and the systems that govern our world, and the expectations those systems place on us as women and men. Then and now, those systems of empire lay claims on us from the time we're born. The values and expectations of empire lay claims on us...forming us...and de-forming us...mostly without our consent or awareness.

This message of a *virgin* birth is an invitation to live outside of those systems. This story of a virgin birth is a story about Mary being *untouched* by the claims of empire on her. When Mary said Yes to the angel, she said Yes to living within the power of God's Holy Spirit. By saying Yes to the pregnancy and power of God's Holy Spirit, Mary said No to the power of political systems. She said No to religious systems and institutions. No to patriarchy. No to institutional racism. Her Yes to God was a No to systemic oppression of any kind. Mary's Yes to the Spirit of God was a No to any man...to any person...having a claim on her life and on the life of her child.

And she said Yes at the risk of her life. Her Yes to God could cost her future, her husband-to-be, her reputation, and what little power or privilege she had.

Joseph's Yes to God was just as costly. By marrying a pregnant woman he too risked a ruined future and reputation. By saying Yes to the Spirit of God, by staying with Mary, he said No to all the expectations empire and its systems placed on him as a man in his family and community. His Yes to God would make him vulnerable; it would undermine his role and authority; he would be emasculated and ridiculed in his own family and community.

These are big stories. If it sounds like it was easy for Mary and Joseph, then we aren't paying attention. They weren't passive recipients of the Holy Spirit doing something *to* them; rather, *every* part of their body and being, *every aspect* of their identities and lives, *every* part of them was engaged when they said Yes. And *every* part of them would be engaged every day and every year. Every day each of them would choose whether or not to keep saying Yes to the Spirit of God.

Saying Yes to God's Spirit having power in our lives is not for the faint of heart. When we say Yes to God's Spirit, we risk the comfort and security of our lives as we know them. We risk our reputations and identities. We risk control and place and power.

But when we say Yes—Yes to being recipients of God's favor and Yes to God's Agency in our lives—we begin to experience an Agency that's so much bigger than our individual agency and control. And with it there is a liberation...an aliveness that's more powerful and wonderful that we could have imagined. When we—with *every* part of our body and being and identity—when we enter into an engaged partnership with God's Spirit, we begin to notice that our fears and our need for control begin to release and fall away. It's uncharted territory to step outside of empire's power and outside of our ego's control and into the

power of the Holy Spirit. It can be a terrifying freefall. And when we do, when we take that one step, we wonder why it took us so long!

Today, in 2021 *we* are being invited to give birth to Christ in the world. We're being invited to give birth to light and hope...and joy. We are *not* being asked to give birth to Jesus. Mary and Joseph already did that. But there is an invitation to let God be born in us. Mary and Joseph are showing us the way. They are inviting us to join them saying Yes to the life-creating power of God's Holy Spirit. Whether we are male or female, whether we are somebody or nobody, this story is for us.

God's message for us in Advent...each Advent...is to receive God's favor and to say Yes to the power of God's Spirit in our lives. Saying Yes to the Spirit of God within us isn't a once and done event. It is a daily invitation, a weekly choice, a yearly possibility. When we choose Yes, by the power of God's Holy Spirit, we *will* give birth to light and hope, to grace and mercy, to love and forgiveness, to joy. We aren't being asked to give birth to a savior; instead, this birth is saving *us*. When we say Yes, God is saving the world by saving *us*. When we choose Yes, the Holy Spirit *will* give birth to God's presence in us. And the coming of Christ within us gives birth to healing in our lives. The coming of Christ instills within us miraculous powers...powers to live with hope and joy in a broken world. When the power of the Holy Spirit is at work, in our lives and relationships, we begin to experience and participate in the miracles of healing and reparation, of reconciliation and re-membering.

May we join Mary and Joseph on the way to Bethlehem, trusting them to show us the way.

May we say Yes to receiving God's favor.

And May we say Yes to the miracle of God's life-creating and saving Holy Spirit in our lives.

Communion

Prayer, adapted from *Voices Together* 0941

Leader: O God, Ancient of Days,
By the life-creating power of Your Spirit your love brought galaxies into being,
summoned water and sky, earth and all creatures,
made us in Your image,
and gifted Your favor to us.
Through the ages You have cared for all You created.
When we wandered, You re-membered us.
In the fullness of time, through the lives and beings of Mary and Joseph
You sent us the Messiah, Jesus Christ,
to teach love and hope and joy.
In the power of the Holy Spirit
He lived what his parents taught him
He was...and is...God's Presence in the world.
In wonder, we remember the life Jesus lived,
laid down, and took up again for us.
Send your Spirit upon us
so that the bread we break and the cup we share
may be the communion of the body of Christ.
Send your Spirit upon us
And give us the courage to say Yes
so that we can give birth to the love, hope, and joy of Jesus.

Amen.

Words of institution

Sing

Invitation

As a response to God's gift of favor to us
As our Yes to the Holy Spirit of God
As our Yes to the life-creating power of the Holy Spirit
You are invited...we are invited to share Bread and Cup at the Lord's Table.
If you wish to share this morning, Karl and I will distribute God's life-giving bread
And God's cup of love
Hold the bread and cup until all are served

Distribute bread and cup; hold

Eat God's life-creating bread
Drink from God's cup of love
Received God's favor
And be re-membered.